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The *Comité mondial des femmes*  
*contre la guerre et le fascisme:*

Anti-Fascist, Feminist, and  
Communist Activism in the 1930s

J CALVER

PhD

2019

The *Comité mondial des femmes  
contre la guerre et le fascisme*:

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Communist Activism in the 1930s

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the award of  
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Research undertaken in the school of History  
in the faculty of Arts, Design and Social  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* (CMF), a communist front organisation which operated from 1934 until 1940, with particular focus on how different forms of activism (feminist, communist, and anti-fascist) were represented in its work. It argues that the CMF was an example of an organisation based on Popular Front ideals of socialist unity before it became the official policy of the Comintern, which facilitated the organisation of women from across the left side of the political spectrum against the growing threat fascism and war. The group was primarily intended to mount an organised female resistance to fascism, as well as serving as a means of creating propaganda aimed at non-communist women in the west.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses early examples of Popular Front activism in response to the rise of the Nazi party from which the CMF drew inspiration to understand the origins of the movement, particularly the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. The second chapter examines the backgrounds of four prominent women in the committee to understand its orientation: Bernadette Cattaneo, Gabrielle Duchêne, Maria Rabaté and Charlotte Haldane. The third chapter covers the proceedings of CMF congresses in the context of other international women's congresses of the interwar period, emphasising these as the site of complex activist meetings, particularly through the diverse nature of the participants. The fourth chapter discusses the relationship between CMF women and Soviet women in terms of correspondence and political tourism in the Soviet Union. The fifth part of this thesis explores three major CMF campaigns around specific world events: the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Nazi fascism, and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The final chapter discusses how the CMF presented various issues relating to women in their journals, *Woman To-Day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*.

The main goal of this thesis is to establish the CMF's role as a Popular Front organisation before the concept was officially adopted by the Comintern. Because of its status as a front organisation, the committee was able to operate with a level of freedom to pursue these ideas of socialist unity. Also important is that this thesis places the CMF in the wider historiography of international women's organisations; it argues that the CMF was unique in the history of these movements however, because of its open utilisation of communist, anti-fascist, anti-militarist and feminist principles in conjunction with its Popular Front character and relationship with the Comintern.

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Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering support for me throughout this experience: my parents and sister for their continuing encouragement and my friends for always being there to listen to my frustrations and celebrate my accomplishments. I would especially like to thank my grandparents: it has been a difficult few years, but your constant faith in my abilities has consistently encouraged me. This piece of work is dedicated to my Nanna Calver, who we unfortunately lost after the Viva but before graduation.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 4 August 2016.

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 82,949.**

Name: Jasmine Calver

Signature:

Date



## Table of Abbreviations

ALWF	American League against War and Fascism
AUS	Amis de l'URSS
CGT	Confédération générale du travail (French Socialist Trade Union Federation)
CGTU	Confédération générale du travail unitaire (Communist Trade Union Federation)
CHSVS	Centre d'histoire sociale du XXème siècle
CMF	Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
Comintern	Communist International
IAC	International Action Committee against War Danger and Fascism
ICW	International Council of Women
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance (now known as International Alliance of Women, IAW)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, German Communist Party
LC	La Contemporaine
MOPR	International Red Aid
PCB	Parti communiste de Belgique, Belgian Communist Party
PCE	Partido Comunista de España, Spanish Communist Party
PCF	Parti communiste français, French Communist Party
PCd'I	Partito Comunista d'Italia, Italian Communist Party
PNF	Partito Nazionale Fascista, National Fascist Party, Italy
POB	Parti ouvrier belge, Belgian Worker's Party
Profintern	Red International of Labor Unions

PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano, Italian Socialist Party
SFIO	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière, French Section of the Worker's International or French Socialist Party
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

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Figure 2, Page 95	<p>Image of two banners reading '<i>Pour l'émancipation totale des femmes</i>' and '<i>Soutenons la politique de paix de l'URSS, le pays de la femme libérée</i>' flanking the main stage at the first CMF congress held in August 1934. Behind the banners is a large canvas painted by revolutionary Chinese artists.</p> <p>'Le Congrès du Rassemblement mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', <i>L'œuvre</i>, 5 August 1934, p. 1.</p>
Figure 3, Page 242	<p>Image of Breastfeeding Woman</p> <p>'Nativité au 6ème étage', <i>Femmes dans l'action mondiale</i> (March 1937), p. 10.</p>

## Introduction

On 4 August 1934, over 1,100 women from 28 countries gathered at the Maison de la Mutualité in Paris. For four days, these female activists discussed united action against the twin spectre of military conflict and right-wing dictatorship. By the close of the congress on 7 August, a new international women's organisation had been set up to confront fascism, the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* (Women's World Committee Against War and Fascism, or CMF). Delegates pledged that they would create national sections of the group in their own countries, and the CMF began to work against one of the major political problems of the twentieth century. Two international CMF congresses were held before the outbreak of World War Two – the founding congress in Paris and a congress in Marseille in 1938 – and plans were underway for a third in Cuba. In addition, national sections sporadically held their own meetings and the international executive committee met regularly at their base in Paris from 1934 to 1938 and in London in 1939. The group was active from 1934 until shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, when international activism became more difficult and the only possible action against fascism seemed to be militarism. The committee had several national sections across Western Europe and Scandinavia, but CMF activism also occurred further afield in India, China and South America, for example. There are no complete membership figures for the CMF, but some figures are available for its national sections: the French section was the largest, with 'up to 200,000 women united around 2,000 committees' in March 1937. The Belgian section had a much smaller membership, at around only 2,000 members, while the Swiss section had about 500 members.<sup>1</sup>

The committee was founded in a period of international upheaval, with the rise of radical political ideologies which created an atmosphere ripe for the growth of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Information on the Work of the National Women's Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Commissions' (13.3.1937), Pandor, 543\_2\_21, Doc. 84, pp. 1, 4, and 8.

nationalism based on racial hierarchy. Many activists on the left saw the Soviet Union and communist ideology as a bastion of progress and equality in this period, and viewed it as directly opposed to, and capable of combatting fascism.<sup>2</sup> Enzo Traverso has argued that the relationship between the European left-wing intelligentsia and the USSR was characterised by a tone of 'complacency, if not of an uncritical admiration' for the Soviet regime, which tended to excuse its totalitarian aspects because it appeared to be the only state willing to openly declare its opposition to fascism.<sup>3</sup> As such, the relationship between the CMF and the Communist International (or Comintern) was complex, but the committee was intrinsically shaped by the involvement of communist activists and its ties to the Soviet Union. The proliferation of fascist ideology across Europe which arose in part because of a perceived threat of communism, in addition to the social and economic upheaval of the interwar period, galvanised women to organise under the CMF umbrella to confront the threat that fascism and war posed to their lives.

The CMF was a 'transnational advocacy network', which Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have defined as 'relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services', who 'try not only to influence policy outcomes, but to transform the terms and nature of the debate'. These networks are 'political spaces' in which actors negotiate 'the social, cultural, and political meanings of their joint enterprise'.<sup>4</sup> The CMF tried to go 'beyond policy change to advocate and instigate changes in the institutional and principled basis of international interactions',

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<sup>2</sup> For more on communist anti-fascist responses to the fascist movement, see Tom Buchanan, 'Anti-Fascism and Democracy in the 1930s', *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2002), pp. 39 – 57; François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 156 – 314 and Stanley G. Payne, 'Soviet Anti-Fascism: Theory and Practice', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2003), pp. 1 – 62.

<sup>3</sup> Enzo Traverso, 'Intellectuals and Anti-Fascism: For a Critical Historization', *New Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2004), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 2-3.

particularly in terms of how women were impacted by the changing social landscape of the 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

The CMF was at the intersection of several strands of thought that were prominent in left-wing activism in this period, all of which had transnational dimensions. The group was a proponent of anti-militarist, socialist, feminist, and anti-fascist activism which manifested itself in various ways. The CMF was the initiative of a group of women lead by its president, Gabrielle Duchêne, a bourgeois pacifist activist best known for her work in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and its secretary, Bernadette Cattaneo, a working-class communist cadre and strike organiser. They used their 'multifarious' knowledge of feminism, pacifism, anti-fascism and communism to create an organisation in the image of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, but with a focus on women.<sup>6</sup> The CMF defined its contribution to international activism in simple terms as 'the struggle against war and fascism' and 'for the liberation of women' from fascist oppression.<sup>7</sup>

The committee took its model from the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, an international organisation which directed workers and left-wing intellectuals against the growing threat posed by fascist ideology. Led by the French novelists Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland, Amsterdam-Pleyel was launched in August 1933. It was strongly influenced by communist ideology and, as such, has been described as a communist front organisation. The Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, for all its strengths, was male dominated and did not think about the threat to women's social status under fascism. The CMF was 'based on the guiding principles of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement' and its 'political line corresponded to that of Amsterdam-Pleyel'. The CMF argued that it did not become an official member of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuelle Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', *French History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2004), p. 291.

<sup>7</sup> 'Le mouvement des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (29.04.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_4, Doc. 1, p. 1.

earlier movement because the women's movement had a 'larger character' and had reached 'classes of women that Amsterdam-Pleyel could not reach'.<sup>8</sup>

The group diverged from the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement primarily because its feminist goals added another dimension to its anti-fascist work. The CMF deployed gendered language in its campaigns and propaganda to present pacifism and anti-fascism as specifically feminine attributes. Motherhood and the concept of international sisterhood were consistently invoked by the CMF as reasons why women were predisposed to peace work, which mirrored the rhetoric of bourgeois women's pacifist movements. Women's potential for maternity gave 'feminist peace activists a special position within a society in which they have never had any real political power, especially in the arena of international affairs'. It was argued that because 'only women can experience maternal feelings', they had the 'edge over men in understanding emotions, in being compassionate, and in being able to envision peace'. According to Harriet Hyman Alonso, it was not necessary for women to actually be mothers because 'just possessing the proper biology or the emotional capacity to "mother" has been enough to claim the superiority of motherhood' for peace work.<sup>9</sup> Jo Vellacott has suggested that women's organisations, particularly WILPF, 'deliberately trail[ed] clouds of motherhood and nurturing' to justify women's involvement in a highly politicised discourse, which she has argued could be 'positively subversive of feminist purpose'.<sup>10</sup> This can also be applied to the CMF, as although the CMF did not advocate maternalism as a defining concept of women's activism, it often appealed to women as mothers in its campaigns and journals.

However, the CMF's combination of feminism, communism and anti-fascism created problems which were not always easily surmountable. Mercedes Yusta has

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Jo Vellacott, 'A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1993), p. 24.

argued that the evolution of women's anti-fascist organisations and 'their problematic relationships' with bourgeois feminist organisations created a multitude of issues. Yusta has described the CMF as filled with inherent contradictions precisely because of the 'mass' character of the movement, as some feminist women 'found it hard to make a realistic analysis of the situation created by the rise of fascism in Germany' and some even 'minimised the fascist danger'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, June Hannam has pointed out that the women's movement was fractured along 'national, class and racial lines' in this period, which made it difficult to create 'a politics around the category 'woman', in particular one which suggests that women share common problems regardless of their national identity'.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis will contribute to existing literature on the women's anti-fascist movement in the 1930s by examining the work of the CMF and understanding how members of this organisation interacted with the dominant political ideologies of the period. The ways in which the CMF was organised, the language utilised in campaigns, and the group's relationship with the Soviet Union will be examined to demonstrate that the CMF was a complex organisation which utilised a synthesis of different ideas in the pursuit of an effective anti-fascist movement. It was a Soviet-linked, international women's organisation, which, in the process of invoking feminist demands such as women's right to work and vote, deployed the language of gender difference to appeal to a broad section of the female populace. The overarching aim of this thesis is to situate the CMF in its rightful place in the history of international women's activism between the wars, and to establish its designation as an early

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<sup>11</sup> Mercedes Yusta, 'The Strained Courtship Between Antifascism and Feminism: From the Women's World Committee (1934) to the Women's International Democratic Federation (1945)', in Hugo Garcia et al. (eds.) *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics 1922 to the Present* (Oxford: Berghan Books, 2016), p. 167 and 173.

<sup>12</sup> June Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: 'at the crossroads of several interlocking identities'', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3-4 (2005), p. 554.



Popular Front organisation, before the policy was adopted by the larger international communist movement.

## **Historiography of the CMF**

The CMF has been almost entirely neglected in the historiography of international activist movements in the interwar period. This originates in part from a tendency to ignore the contributions of women to anti-fascist movements, which Isabelle Richet has argued stems from the fact that 'most of the sources of the history of anti-fascism deal with the political space occupied by men'. Furthermore, she argues that there has been a 'missed encounter between women's history, gender history, and the history of anti-fascism'.<sup>13</sup> However, the later section of this introduction will show that there is a rich potential source base for investigating women's anti-fascist activism that can provide context for an analysis of the CMF.

Mercedes Yusta has contributed the only study of the CMF to the edited volume *Rethinking Antifascism*, positioning the group as the precursor of the Women's International Democratic Federation, a communist front organisation founded in 1945. Yusta supports Richet's assertion that women's contribution to anti-fascist activism has been largely ignored by historians; she argues that 'the historiography of anti-fascism has neglected and minimised the importance of women's involvement, which was not only numerically sizeable, but also provided anti-fascist political culture with mobilisation discourses and strategies'.<sup>14</sup> Her examination of the CMF is relatively surface-level, and in terms of her source base, she entirely relies on articles from the CMF periodical *Femmes dans l'action*

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<sup>13</sup> Isabelle Richet, 'Women and Antifascism: Historiographical and Methodological Approaches' in Garcia et al. (eds.) *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics 1922 to the Present*, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Yusta, 'The Strained Courtship Between Antifascism and Feminism: From the Women's World Committee (1934) to the Women's International Democratic Federation (1945)', in Garcia et al. (eds.) *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics 1922 to the Present*, p. 167.

*mondiale*. Her goal is to establish an ideological link between the CMF and the Women's International Democratic Federation, which also focused on women's rights and anti-fascism. It is a useful starting point for an examination of women's contribution to anti-fascism but does not offer an in-depth study of the complexities of the CMF's role in the international anti-fascist and communist movements in the interwar period.

Otherwise, research on the CMF can be found in studies of its leaders. Full studies of Gabrielle Duchêne and Bernadette Cattaneo's life and work are rare. Emmanuelle Carle has written a doctoral thesis on Duchêne which covers her entire activist career in detail, including a chapter which charts Duchêne's anti-fascism during the 1930s. Lorraine Coons has also published an article discussing Duchêne's shifting activist priorities throughout her life.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, publications on WILPF's interwar history usually mention Gabrielle Duchêne; she clashed with other WILPF members over the best approach to Nazi militarism by advocating a proactive stance which cast aside absolute pacifist ideology. Duchêne tried to convince the WILPF Executive Committee to 'lay aside all dogmas, even pacifist dogmas and face the reality' that fascism lead to 'a barbarism which equals, when it does not surpass, that of the darkest epochs of history'.<sup>16</sup> Carle's thesis is not particularly nuanced in its assessment of Duchêne's relationship with the Comintern as it is not considered that Duchêne could have been actively working with communists because she was a communist sympathiser; for Carle, if the CMF was under the complete control of the Comintern, then Duchêne could only have been 'manipulated by the communists in her role as organiser, president and propagandist' of the group.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuelle Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', *French History*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (2004), pp. 291 – 314; Lorraine Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', *Peace and Change*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 121 – 147.

<sup>16</sup> Gabrielle Duchêne, 'Attitude of the W.I.L.P.F. in regard to Revolutionary Events: Is Capitalism compatible with lasting peace?', *Pax International*, Vol. 9, No.3 (July-August 1934), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuelle Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : Entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme' (PhD : McGill University, 2005), p. 297.

Research on Bernadette Cattané is scarcer: it is essentially limited to a book chapter published in 2017 which discusses Cattané alongside another prominent female communist, Marthe Desrumeaux.<sup>18</sup> When Cattané is mentioned in histories of the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), it is often only in relation to her work as a trade union activist or her role in the women's section of the PCF. This is part of a wider trend in the historiography of the communist movement in France which tends to ignore the work of female communists by relegating their contribution to women's issues only. Despite there being limited historical research on the CMF thus far, we are able to understand the context in which it operated by examining larger trends in activism in the interwar period, from which we will be able to situate the CMF in its rightful place in the history of women's activism.

### **Transnationalism**

However, an understanding of four major strands of international activism in the interwar period will provide a strong contextual base in which to examine the ideologies which drove the CMF. The group's choice to define itself according to various principles espoused by international feminism, communism, pacifism, and anti-fascism allows us to utilise the extensive historical research on these topics to understand the place of the CMF in interwar activism, what made it unique, and what its shortcomings were. To understand the international dimension of these concepts an understanding of historiographical debates on transnationalism is necessary. The group's work was defined by its international character, with cooperation and collaboration across borders that shaped the responses of the group's executive body to crises across the globe.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Pudal and Claude Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français* (Ivry-sur-Seine : Les éditions de l'atelier, 2017).

The 'transnational turn' in the 1990s added a new perspective to traditional national histories, which focused on 'relations among sovereign entities' and 'activities setting in contact official bodies – states, universities, associations or parties – belonging to different states'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, transnational history focuses on 'cross-national connections, whether through individuals... or in terms of objectives shared by people and communities regardless of their nationality'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Patricia Clavin has argued that 'transnational history has sought to stress the entanglement of peoples, ideas, technologies and economies with cultural, political, and social movements'.<sup>21</sup> For Akira Iriye, a transnational approach to the study of history provides us with the basis to investigate the 'intricate interrelationship between nations and transnational existences, between national preoccupations and transnational agendas, or between national interests and transnational concerns'.<sup>22</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier argues that a transnational perspective can be utilised by 'all historians of the last 200-250 years, whose research project entails researching and writing a history with nations that is not a history of nations'.<sup>23</sup> For Saunier, the transnational perspective 'acknowledges... foreign contribution to the design, discussion and implementation of domestic features within communities' and deals with 'trends, patterns, organisations and individuals that have been living between... these self-contained entities that we use as units of historical research'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 15; Eliezer Ben Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, *Transnationalism: Diasporas and the Advent of a New (Dis) Order* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Iriye, *Global and Transnational History*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Clavin, 'Introduction: Conceptualising Internationalism between the World Wars', in Daniel Laqua (ed.) *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 1 – 2.

<sup>22</sup> Iriye, *Global and Transnational History*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

One area of history that a transnational approach has revolutionised is the study of advocacy networks and non-governmental organisations. Nicola Piper and Anders Uhlin have defined activism as

‘political activities that are: (1) ...of a contentious nature; (2) challenging or supporting certain power structures; (3) involving non-state actors; and (4) taking place (at least partly) outside formal political arenas’.<sup>25</sup>

The term ‘activist’ has been defined as a person ‘that advocates or engages in action’, who ‘undertakes vigorous political or social campaigning’, and who cares ‘enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur some significant costs and act to achieve their goals’.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Richard Davies has argued that activism becomes transnational when it embodies one or more of five possible features:

‘(1) when it has a ‘focus on transnational issues’; (2) when the activist organisations are transnational in structure; (3) when ‘transnational methods and strategies’ are applied; (4) when the targets of activism are located in several countries; and (5) when the activists ‘hold transnational views and consider themselves as “global citizens”’.<sup>27</sup>

Following from the point made at the beginning of the thesis regarding the CMF’s designation as a ‘transnational advocacy group’, it is necessary to expand on the concept; Keck and Sikkink further define transnational activist organisations as often reaching

‘beyond policy change to advocate and instigate changes in the institutional and principled basis of international interactions... [and] includes those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services... Activists in networks try not only to influence policy outcomes, but to transform the terms and nature of the debate’.<sup>28</sup>

However, transnational approaches to historical study are not without criticism. An extensive discussion of transnationalism as a category of analysis penned by Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J. T. Way presents ‘the notion of the

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<sup>25</sup> Nicola Piper and Anders Uhlin, ‘New Perspectives on Transnational Activism’, in Nicola Piper and Anders Uhlin (eds.), *Transnational Activism in Asia: Problems of Power and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Activist, adj. and n.’, Oxford English Dictionary Online, July 2018 [www.oed.com/view/Entry/273137] Accessed 19.09.2018; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Richard Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p.7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

transnational' as a means of centring 'certain kinds of historical events as the emphatically non-national but indisputably important processes that they are', but also warns against focusing too much on the 'larger, global forces' at the expense of the 'local and regional specificities'.<sup>29</sup> The importance of the nation, and as an extension nationalism, as a category of analysis is reiterated as a means of understanding how national ideologies come to influence 'diverse struggles, symbols, institutions and identities'.<sup>30</sup> Regardless, research on activist organisations in the interwar period has been greatly impacted by the historiographical turn towards the transnational; the international as a means of historical analysis alone is not a satisfactory conceptual framework for studies of many activist groups because much of the work they did depended on unofficial (i.e. non-governmental) collaboration across borders. For example, three of the largest women's organisations active in the interwar period, WILPF, the International Council of Women (ICW), and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), operated across borders to coordinate women's responses to the questions of the 'political and legal conditions [of women], education and employment, temperance and social purity, philanthropy and organisation', as well as peace and women's suffrage.<sup>31</sup> They also espoused the benefits of transnational co-operation as a means of confronting issues facing women and to achieve their goals, demonstrating a wider pattern of women's collaboration across borders.

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<sup>29</sup> Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J. T. Way, 'Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2008), p. 627 and 644.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 644.

<sup>31</sup> Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements c. 1880s – 1970s* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 15; For further reading, see: Marilyn J. Boxer, 'Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept of "Bourgeois Feminism"', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (2007), pp. 131 – 158; Denise Davidson, 'De-centring Twentieth Century Women's Movements', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2001), pp. 503 – 512; Anne Marie Pois, 'Perspectives on Twentieth Century Women's International Activism: Peace, Feminism and Foreign Policy', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1999), pp. 213-222; Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Patricia Ward D'Itri, *Cross Currents in the International Women's Movements 1848 – 1948* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999).

## Interwar Women's Movements

The richness of women's activism in the early twentieth century has provided ample material for historians to study women's movements.<sup>32</sup> The crossover of activists between the CMF, WILPF, the ICW and the IWSA, in conjunction with the feminist language used by the CMF, mean that, in some respects, the group could be described as an indirect descendent of these earlier organisations. Several studies of transnational women's movements in this period have been published since the late 1990s: first, Leila Rupp's impressive monograph, *Worlds of Women*, is a wide-ranging analysis of the genesis of the international women's movement in the early twentieth century, which examines conflicts and cooperation that existed between various women's organisations.<sup>33</sup> Rupp also analyses the problems that presented themselves for women's movements with the growth in popularity of socialism.<sup>34</sup> She argues that, because many international women's organisations were dominated by bourgeois women in this period, conflicts arose when socialist women were denied the opportunity to discuss the labour problems that they faced. In addition, ardently socialist women were generally suspicious of these bourgeois organisations. Rupp particularly provides a useful analysis of the conflict in WILPF that arose due to the communist sympathies of some members, including CMF president Gabrielle Duchêne.

Karen Offen has argued that 'the history of feminisms has never been accorded a place in existing taxonomies of knowledge', while 'male-dominated socio-

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<sup>32</sup> See Glenda Sluga, 'Women, Feminisms, and Twentieth Century Internationalisms' in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds.) *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 61 – 84.

<sup>33</sup> For more of Rupp's work on international feminisms, see: Leila Rupp, 'Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organisations, 1888 – 1945', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (1994), pp. 1571 – 1600; Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, 'Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth Century Feminism', *Signs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 363 – 386.

<sup>34</sup> Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 20.

political movements' like socialism and communism received ample attention.<sup>35</sup> Offen's work is distinct because she argues that a 'feminist critique of women's subordinate status in Europe' did not begin with the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution; rather, Offen traces these critiques to as early as 1700, dating them to the height of Enlightenment thinking. The main strength of her book, *European Feminisms*, is that it is not biographical, as many accounts of the history of feminism tend to be, and instead directly links contemporary politics with feminist movements. For example, Offen discusses how feminists interacted with nationalism, socialism, imperialism, and fascism, ending her monograph at the early part of the Cold War. However, Judith Allen has criticised Offen's discussion of feminism in a 'dynamic and richly historical' political context as making feminism appear 'fixed, almost transhistorical'. Allen argued it is feminism's 'socialist, nationalist or fascist engagements that provide the ostensible historicity here rather than developments within feminism itself'.<sup>36</sup>

Christine Bolt approached her analysis of the American and British women's movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from perspectives of race and class.<sup>37</sup> A unique text in a field which often ignores the topic of race, Bolt's study examines the divisions in the British and American women's movements, while simultaneously 'acknowledging the achievements of feminists working in the organisations of race, class, and internationalism'. She argues that race and class 'clearly defined women as importantly as gender, and equally disturbed and shaped the development of feminism', yet hers is one of the only works which has examined the inclusion (or lack of) of non-white and non-Western women in international

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700 – 1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Judith A. Allen, 'Reviews of Books: European Feminisms 1700-1950: A Political History Karen Offen', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2002), p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> For more of Bolt's analysis of feminist movements, see: Christine Bolt, *Feminist Ferment: "The Woman Question" in the USA and England, 1870-1940* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).



women's organisations.<sup>38</sup> This line of enquiry could be transposed onto the CMF: the CMF was dominated by western women, and although the group campaigned on non-European issues, the location of the international committee in France all but excluded women from other continents from participation. Bolt also positioned the Comintern as an international body unsuitable for women's activism; she argued that despite aiming to eradicate the 'ideology and traditions of "female bondage"', the Comintern did not demonstrate how changes to the traditional family structure and radical communal childcare could be achieved outside 'the exemplary Soviet Union'. She quoted Ellen Dubois to support this point, who argued that 'in the whole history of the Left, the Third International stands out for its failure to generate a corollary feminist movement'.<sup>39</sup>

A feminist analysis of the work and membership of the CMF is necessary for understanding why so many women were attracted to the group; however, a feminist analysis alone is not enough to fully understand the unique role that the CMF played in interwar women's activist circles. Rather, it needs to be examined in the context of conflict and collaboration between feminists on the one hand, and socialism on the other. One way that we can do this is through an examination of individual women who traversed political boundaries in their work for the CMF. Ellen Wilkinson, the British Labour MP who was involved in the CMF, is an excellent example of convergence between feminist and socialist politics. Laura Beers and Matt Perry have both written biographies of Wilkinson which can help us to understand how left-wing women engaged with feminism to tackle international issues.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> See Laura Beers, 'A Model MP? Ellen Wilkinson, Gender, Politics and Celebrity Culture in Interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2013), pp. 231 – 250; Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (London: Harvard University Press, 2016); Matt Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movements and World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); and Matt Perry, 'In Search of "Red Ellen" Wilkinson Beyond Frontiers and Beyond the Nation State', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 58, No. 8 (2013), pp. 219 – 246.

## International Communism and Socialism

Studies of women's relationships with socialist parties can also provide extensive context on this point. The volume edited by Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women*, has provided a comparative framework for discussing how socialist parties tackled 'the woman question' on a national basis. The word 'socialism' was chosen to denote 'the many formal and informal activities that made up the working-class movement', including social democratic parties, communists, anarchists, youth groups, trade unions and cooperative societies, among other workers organisations and movements.<sup>41</sup>

This volume tackles the contradictions between the shared ideal of gender equality held by socialist men and women and the 'ingrained notions of gender difference and hierarchy' which dominated politics and society in this period.<sup>42</sup> Gruber and Graves argue that, although male socialist leaders used 'rhetorical, theoretical or potential equality to disguise the reality of continuing male control', socialist women used the idea of separate spheres to 'break through the barriers to effective policy making' particularly through exercising the right to contribute to policy on maternity, women's health and childcare.<sup>43</sup> Helmut Gruber's chapter focuses on attempts by members of the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO, French Socialist Party) to attract women to the party and the disconnect that existed between these efforts and the party's policies towards women. Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert's chapter examines the PCF's policy on women with similar criteria. Both chapters offer illuminating statistics to support their conclusions, and demonstrate succinctly that, in interwar French politics, women were not truly a priority.

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<sup>41</sup> Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves, 'Introduction', in Helmut Gruber and Pamela Graves (eds.), *Women and Socialism – Socialism and Women: Europe Between the World Wars* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

However, although the comparative approach of this text has its merits, it does not examine the policies of the Communist International nor the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) towards women in this period. The Comintern grouped together national communist parties under Soviet control, whereas the LSI was a federation of parties which had no direct control over its adherents.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is often difficult to identify whether the failings of socialist and communist parties to engage women on a satisfactory level can truly be attributed to the national group or if the international governing body deserves a share of the blame. However, studies of the Comintern also often fail to consider the power dynamics between the male communist leadership and its female members and tend to avoid analysis of their policies towards women.<sup>45</sup>

The advent of *Glasnost* under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and the subsequent opening of the Soviet Central Party Archives has greatly impacted the historical study of the phenomenon of communist internationalism by western historians, allowing for a clearer analysis of the Comintern and its transnational influence.<sup>46</sup> However, historians had not neglected the study of international communism prior to 1990. The pre-*Glasnost* historiography of the Comintern has been divided into four genres: the 'dissident communist' critique, the 'anti-communist' approach 'dominant during the early Cold War', the official communist line, and the 'more 'scientific' scholarly studies undertaken since the 1960s'. Kevin McDermott and

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<sup>44</sup> For more on the Labour and Socialist International see G.D.H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume IV: Communism and Social Democracy 1914-1931 Part II* (London: Macmillan, 1965); Talbot Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Daniel Laqua, 'Democratic Politics and the League of Nations: The Labour and Socialist International as a Protagonist of Interwar Internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2015), pp. 175-192; and Silke Neunsinger, 'Creating the International Spirit of Socialist Women: Women in the Labour and Socialist International 1923 – 1939', in Pernilla Johnson et al. (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Women's Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> See Patrizia Dogliani, 'The Fate of Socialist Internationalism' in Sluga and Clavin (eds.) *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History*, pp. 38 – 61.

<sup>46</sup> Oleksa Drachewych has recently published an excellent review article on transnational histories of the Comintern. See Oleksa Drachewych, 'The Communist Transnational? Transnational Studies and the History of the Comintern', *History Compass*, e12521 (2018).

Jeremy Agnew identify the first three genres as overtly politically motivated, 'either of anti- or pro-communist nature', which in their opinion devalued much of the work, useful only for the insights they offer into 'the activities of the International and its constituent national communist parties'.<sup>47</sup> E.H. Carr and Duncan Hallas both wrote monographs on the history of the Comintern in the 1980s, before access to many Comintern documents was available.<sup>48</sup>

One of the first monographs to be published following the opening of the Soviet archives was McDermott and Agnew's 1996 study on the Comintern. Further works by Robert Service in 2007 and the volume edited by Norman Laporte, Kevin Morgan and Matthew Worley in 2008 have helped to shed light on the intricate power dynamics and conflicts within the Comintern in its short lifetime.<sup>49</sup> Two major historiographical strands have emerged with this renewed scholarship: the first strand examines the Comintern, its national sections and official bodies, while the second strand examines the covert, communist front organisations that were sponsored by the Comintern to spread communist ideals and encourage support for the Soviet Union. Often, historiography of both the Comintern and communist front organisations ignore gender, and as such we are left with a gap in the literature on how the Comintern and communist front organisations tried to involve women. Literature on the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) also tends to ignore the gendered dimension of its interwar work, but research on the party is still useful for an analysis of the context

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<sup>47</sup> Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), p. xxii.

<sup>48</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930 – 1935* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982); E.H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern: The History of the Third International* (London: Bookmarks, 1985).

<sup>49</sup> Robert Service, *Comrades! A History of World Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Norman Laporte et al. (eds.), *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-53* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); see also Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism, 1917 – 1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

that the CMF was working in, in terms of its leadership and communist influence more generally.<sup>50</sup>

However, this gap can partly be rectified by utilising the extensive literature regarding the phenomenon of fellow-travellers. David Caute has argued that being a fellow-traveller meant 'commitment *at a distance*, which is not only geographical but also emotional and intellectual. It is remote-control radicalism'.<sup>51</sup> For Caute, we can only understand the concept of fellow-travelling 'in terms of a disillusionment' with the fact that the 'great promises of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment' had not been realised. As such some Western intellectuals turned towards the ideology in which they identified some aspects of 'progress, social justice, scientific rationality, peace, equality [and] the workers' state'.<sup>52</sup> The concept of fellow-travelling offered a way for scholars outside the USSR from the 1960s onward to examine the impact that Soviet communism had on the west, which was otherwise hampered by Cold War politics and the restricted Soviet archives. Caute, the premier historian of fellow-travellers, published his seminal work on the topic in 1988. Since the opening of the archives, there has been a renewed interest in the experiences and motivations of fellow-travellers, with Paul Hollander, Sophie Coeuré, Ludmilla Stern, and Michael David-Fox all contributing to the field since 1999.<sup>53</sup> The historiography also acknowledges that women were just as likely as men to overtly support the Soviet Union and visit

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<sup>50</sup> For more on the PCF, see Guillaume Bourgeois, 'French Communism and the Communist International', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1984); Tom Kemp, *Stalinism in France: The First Twenty Years of the French Communist Party, Volume 1* (London: New Park Publications, 1984); Ronald Tiersky, *French Communism, 1920-1972* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1974).

<sup>51</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 6 – 7.

<sup>53</sup> Sophie Coeuré, *La Grande Lueur à l'Est : Les Français et l'Union Soviétique 1917 - 1939* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1999) ; Michael David-Fox, 'The Fellow Travelers Revisited: the "Cultured West" through Soviet Eyes', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75 (2003), pp. 300 - 335; Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998); Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920 – 1940: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London: Routledge, 2007).

the country: Angela Kershaw in particular has examined French and British women who travelled to the USSR because of their interest in the new society, much of which is useful for understanding the motivations of non-communist women in joining communist dominated organisations.<sup>54</sup>

### **Anti-Militarism and Anti-Fascism**

The anti-militarist and anti-fascist aspects of the CMF's international activism were closely linked, although by no means mutually exclusive. Pacifist movements which grew as a reaction to the First World War have been the subject of much historical enquiry: Peter Brock has been responsible for two volumes that tackle the growth of pacifist movements across the globe.<sup>55</sup> *Challenge to Mars*, edited by Brock with Thomas Socknat, explores interwar pacifism in its various forms, including conscientious objectors, religious pacifism, pacifist organisations and pacifism under dictatorships. Further, it contains chapters by Rachel Waltner Goossen, Josephine Eglin, and Anne Marie Pois which discuss women's contribution to pacifist activism in Britain and the USA.<sup>56</sup> However, discussion of women in peace movements outside of these two countries is not covered in this otherwise comprehensive study, and only one chapter explores women's pacifism in the context of an international organisation: the chapter written by Pois discusses conflicts in the early years of the US section of WILPF on the nature of the pacifism that they would promote.

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<sup>54</sup> Angela Kershaw, 'French and British Female Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: The Journey to the USSR, 1929 – 1942', *E-Rea* [Online], No. 7 (2006), [accessed 6.2.2015].

<sup>55</sup> Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat (eds.), *Challenge to Mars: Essays on Pacifism from 1918 to 1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, 'Pacifist Professional Women on the Job in the United States', in Brock and Socknat (eds.) *Challenge to Mars*; Josephine Eglin, 'Women Pacifists in Interwar Britain', in Brock and Socknat (eds.), *Challenge to Mars*; Anne Marie Pois, 'Practical' and Absolute Pacifism in the Early Years of the U.S. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', in Brock and Socknat (eds.) *Challenge to Mars*.

Norman Ingram has contributed to scholarship on pacifism in the French context. His study on the subject charts the development of interwar French pacifism from the *pacifisme ancien* style, which was characterised by internationalist and liberal thought and was prominent in the 1920s, to the *pacifisme nouveau* style of the 1930s which was absolute and 'essentially anti-political'.<sup>57</sup> Ingram places the peace movement squarely in the context of French politics and investigates how the proliferation of fascist states impacted French pacifist ideology. In addition, and of interest, is the third section of the book which deals with feminist pacifism in interwar France, focusing in large part on the contribution of the French section of WILPF to pacifist activism. Further, Ingram charts the relationship between the French section of WILPF and the larger international body, including the conflicts that arose from Gabrielle Duchêne's militant anti-fascism in the 1930s.

It is also necessary to mention the contribution of scholars to the historiography of women and peace after the First World War. Sybil Oldfield has examined women's struggle against militarism biographically in *Women against the Iron Fist*, examining how individual women structured their opposition to war and violence, whereas Susan Kent has explored how the violence of the First World War shaped female responses to feminism and the threat of war in Britain.<sup>58</sup> Jo Vellacott has published on the organisational response of women to war in the first part of the interwar period with particular reference to WILPF; Vellacott is adamant that women's involvement in peace-making in the interwar period was not simply due to their potential as mothers, and instead argues that they were 'strongly feminist and their

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<sup>57</sup> Norman Ingram, 'Defending the Rights of Man: The *Ligue des droits de l'homme* and the Problem of Peace', in Brock and Sonat (eds.), *Challenge to Mars*, p. 117; see also Norman Ingram, *Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919 – 1939* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Norman Ingram, 'Repressed Memory Syndrome: Interwar French Pacifism and the Attempt to Recover France's Pacifist Past', *French History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2004), pp. 315 – 330.

<sup>58</sup> Sybil Oldfield, *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism 1900-1989* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Susan Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

actions consciously political', geared towards gaining a seat for women at the table of international politics.<sup>59</sup>

In terms of the historiography of anti-fascism, Kasper Braskén and Larry Ceplair have both written on how the Left organised against fascism, which held anti-socialist views as the core of its outlook. Braskén's article uncovers the roots of socialist resistance to Italian fascism in the early 1920s, with an emphasis on the transnational aspects of this resistance. He disputes the idea that a 'European culture of anti-fascism' was born in the 1930s because of Nazi fascism, and charts the continuities and 'discontinuities' between the early attempts at anti-fascism in the 1920s and the anti-fascist movement which arose after 1933.<sup>60</sup> Ceplair's text centres on the Left's perceived failure to organise an effective anti-fascist movement in the interwar period, focusing on Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union, France, Britain and the United States.<sup>61</sup> However, Albert Lindemann has criticised Ceplair for relying too heavily on secondary material and being not too 'intimately familiar with the period'. He takes Ceplair to task for focusing on the 'mostly inconsequential happenings at the surface' of leftist politics in this period and for only giving a 'dim sense of culture and political traditions, social structures, or economic change'.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Ceplair's book gives an overview of Marxist attempts to organise against fascism across the entire interwar period, covering the rise of both Italian and German fascism.

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<sup>59</sup> Vellacott, 'A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', p. 23; see also Jo Vellacott, 'Feminism as if All People Mattered: Working to Remove the Causes of War, 1919-1929', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2001). pp. 375 – 394.

<sup>60</sup> Kasper Braskén, 'Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923–1924', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2016), p. 574; see also Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Marxists, 1918 – 1939* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1987).

<sup>62</sup> Albert S. Lindemann, 'Reviews of Books: Under the Shadow of War', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (1989), p. 127.



Nigel Copsey has covered the anti-fascist response in Britain in two books. The first, edited by Copsey with Andrzej Olechnowicz, covers political responses to fascism by British communists, Labour Party activists and Conservative politicians, as well as the responses of civil society, including women and religious groups. The text is useful not only because it covers a large swathe of British society in this period, but because it does not confine opposition to fascism only to anti-fascist activism, allowing us to see varieties of resistance from the masses as well as political actors.<sup>63</sup> The second text, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, covers a far larger time frame, extending from 'the origins' of anti-fascism in 1923 to more recent struggles against a fascist resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>64</sup>

The foremost historian of women's responses to fascism is Julie Gottlieb; Gottlieb has examined both women's collusion with fascism and their ardent opposition to it, including contributing a chapter to the Copsey and Olechnowicz volume on the 'varieties of feminist responses to fascism in interwar Britain'.<sup>65</sup> Gottlieb's focus tends to be on how British women responded to the growth of a fascist movement in Britain, offering comprehensive analyses of how women participated in or fought against the British Union of Fascists, in addition to research on how the strong masculine body was fashioned as a fascist icon.<sup>66</sup> Gottlieb is particularly concerned with how women reacted to appeasement and other foreign policy decisions made regarding fascist states.<sup>67</sup> Although Gottlieb's examination of British

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<sup>63</sup> Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (eds.), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Interwar Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>65</sup> Julie Gottlieb, 'Varieties of Feminist Responses to Fascism in Interwar Britain', in Copsey and Olechnowicz (eds.) *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*.

<sup>66</sup> Julie Gottlieb, 'Body Fascism in Britain: Building the Blackshirt in the Interwar Period', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), pp. 111 – 136.

<sup>67</sup> Julie Gottlieb, 'Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties': Gender, Collective (In)Security and Anti-Fascism in Britain in the 1930s, *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2012), pp. 197 – 219; Julie Gottlieb, 'The Women's Movement Took the Wrong Turning': British Feminists, Pacifism and the Politics of Appeasement', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2014), pp. 441 – 462; Julie Gottlieb, *Guilty Women, Foreign Policy and Appeasement in Interwar Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); see also Julie Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co Ltd., 2003).

women's anti-fascism is excellent, the wider historiography is lacking with regards to either non-British or transnational women's anti-fascist activism; where transnational anti-fascism is debated, it is often in the context of the work of women's pacifist groups, like WILPF, rather than solely anti-fascist organisations. Although dedicated women's anti-fascist groups were often far smaller than their pacifist counterparts, they did exist, and as such deserve greater examination.

### **Archival Material**

The CMF papers have been digitised in the '*Fonds français de l'Internationale Communiste*', a primary source database created by the Université de Bourgogne in conjunction with the Russian State Socio-Political Archives (RGASPI). It contains 28 'fonds', 23 'sous-fonds', and 3282 documents comprising more than 456,000 pages of material in French, Russian, German and English primarily, but with a limited number of Spanish, Polish, Italian, Chinese, Portuguese and Slovenian documents. It contains Comintern archival material which relates to French communism from 1917 to 1947 which are physically held in RGASPI. This repository of documents was compiled by the fusion of two separate programmes for the digitisation of Comintern sources: the first in the form of microfilms provided by the Russian government and then digitised by the Université de Bourgogne, and the second from the INCOMKA communist archive database. This database is the greatest indication of the official relationship between the CMF and the Comintern; it contains the archives of several French communist 'mass auxiliary organisations', which included four 'international anti-fascist organisations' under which the archives of the CMF can be found. The CMF 'sous-fond' contains 35 sections covering different aspects of CMF congresses, correspondence, and reports from 1934 to the committee's dissolution during World War Two.

In addition, primary material from the archives of the leaders of the CMF, Bernadette Cattaneo and Gabrielle Duchêne, form the source basis of this thesis. Duchêne's archives are more extensive than Cattaneo's; the Duchêne papers, held at *La Contemporaine* in Nanterre, is divided into 122 sections covering topics from her anti-fascist work in Germany and Portugal, her feminism, and her pacifism, to her intellectual life in terms of cinema, culture, and song. However, the documentation on her work with the CMF tends to be more personal in nature, with correspondence and personal notes forming a large portion of the material. On the other hand, the Bernadette Cattaneo archives are only divided into five sections, comprising her political and union engagements, her correspondence and personal papers, the magazines, brochures, and newspapers she was involved with and a book of personal photographs, in addition to a folder of documents generated by her husband, Jean-Baptiste Cattaneo. For the most part, the Cattaneo papers, held at the *Centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle* in Paris, are more official, containing reports and editions of journals she contributed to; even the 'correspondence and personal papers' section contains her membership cards to a number of political organisations. These archives are useful because they allow us to see the work of the CMF from the point of view of the women intimately involved in running it. Furthermore, they demonstrate the division of labour between the two women as Cattaneo was more involved with the official business of the CMF, while Duchêne was more likely to use her prominence in activist causes to encourage the participation of bourgeois women in the movement. Her involvement with WILPF would have limited the amount of time she was able to spend on CMF work, and as such Cattaneo was probably in control of the day-to-day running of the CMF.<sup>68</sup>

CMF journals are an indispensable resource for an examination of the work of the committee. The group published or had a stake in publishing journals in more

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<sup>68</sup> This will be explored further in chapter one.

than sixteen countries, with three countries with more than one journal in circulation. The French section of the CMF had three separate papers, with *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* being the most popular, while the Spanish group had papers in four different regions: Madrid, Bilbao, Valencia, and Catalonia. The Belgian section had two periodicals, one of which was published in French, while the other was published in Flemish. The British section also had a successful journal, *Woman To-day*, and Italian and German language papers were published in Paris for refugees from the fascist regimes. Outside of Europe, there were also periodicals published in Uruguay, Australia, China, Chile, and Argentina.<sup>69</sup> Due to the availability of sources, this thesis will principally explore editions of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* and *Woman To-day*, although archival holdings for both periodicals are not complete. There are more available issues of *Woman To-day* than its French counterpart, as every edition published in 1936, 1937, 1939 and 1940 are available to consult. The journals are indispensable for analysing CMF propaganda, tracking CMF campaigns and for examining how the CMF attempted to attract new members. In addition, left-wing newspapers from Britain and France have also been consulted to provide context to the CMF's work, including *L'Humanité*, the *Manchester Guardian* and various other smaller newspapers.

This thesis provides an examination of the CMF, its work, and its leadership which makes a distinct contribution to the historiography discussed in this introduction; it places the CMF firmly in the context of women's international activism and socialist transnationalism in the interwar period. It charts the CMF's extensive and complex ideology and efforts against war and fascism in the context of the political situation in Western Europe in the 1930s to demonstrate the importance of the committee when

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<sup>69</sup> 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', 25 February 1937, Pandor, 543\_2\_21, document 1, p. 6.

considering international women's movements of the period. It examines three overarching themes to demonstrate the contribution that the CMF made to women's feminist, anti-fascist, socialist and pacifist activism and to posit that the CMF deserves a greater place alongside other organisations in the historiography of women's international activism. First, this thesis argues that the CMF had a mass, diverse character, which was an early iteration of Popular Front strategies. Although perhaps not as large or diverse as some of its counterparts, the CMF was still a movement which engaged women from a variety of backgrounds before many on the extreme left had adopted the policy. The CMF was a Popular Front organisation dominated by communist women before the Comintern policy of 'class against class' had been abandoned. Second, this thesis investigates the nature of the CMF's relationship with the Comintern and the Soviet Union, to establish the true extent of the influence they had over the committee. The third theme centres on the unique approach that the CMF took to the international events of the period which gave women a platform to voice their opinion on topics which were still largely closed to them. However, this also raises the question of how the committee deployed gendered language, particularly the language of motherhood, to appeal to women, and to what extent this was representative of the ideology of the CMF and its members. This thesis will contribute to the existing literature on international feminism, pacifism, communism, and anti-fascism, and provide an entirely new analysis of the combination of all four in one organisation.

To tackle these questions, the thesis is divided into six chapters which each evaluate a different aspect of the CMF. The first chapter discusses the origins of the group through the Comintern response to fascism in the early interwar period and the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. The second chapter investigates the origins of the CMF through the leaders of the group, namely Bernadette Cattaneo, Gabrielle Duchêne, Maria Rabaté and Charlotte Haldane, to understand the ideological basis

of the CMF. This provides useful context for understanding the CMF's relationship with communism and demonstrates that the committee was a joint enterprise which relied heavily on internal and external collaboration with women activists. The third chapter charts the organisation, decoration, and content of CMF congresses to comprehend how widespread the committee's appeal was; furthermore, it examines attendance statistics to argue that the committee successfully attracted a mixture of women from different social, political and national backgrounds, although it could have certainly included more women from outside Europe. The fourth chapter discusses concrete relations between the CMF, the Comintern and the Soviet Union in terms of written correspondence between the group and Soviet citizens; further, the chapter explores visits made by CMF women to the USSR which provided them with first-hand experience of the communist utopia. The fifth chapter covers CMF campaigns on the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, and the Japanese invasion of China and the woman-centric approach that the group chose to take in each; all these campaigns focused only on the specific issues faced by women in these contexts and the language used to propagandise them were heavily gendered with a focus on motherhood as a unifier. The sixth chapter utilises the extensive collections of CMF journals to understand how the committee presented issues facing women in their own countries. Further, it will demonstrate how the CMF used stereotypically feminine images of women's concerns to try to attract non-politicised women. Together, these points of investigation will show that the CMF was an innovative Popular Front organisation, which tried (with a level of success) to include women from left-wing political parties and non-political women to tackle the threat of fascism. The committee also often deployed heavily gendered language which emphasised women's role as potential mother to attract certain women to its work. This thesis will demonstrate that the CMF was an unique, albeit enigmatic movement which utilised several different tactics and approaches to encourage

women to organise themselves against fascism and war, when absolute pacifism was no longer the most satisfactory answer to the growing fascist threat.

## **Chapter One**

### **The Communist International, Fascism, and the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement**

The Communist International was itself a fledgling organisation when the fascist movement began to come to prominence. Its responses to the different incarnations of fascism through the interwar period varied, with a number of official approaches and policies employed to tackle them. This chapter will provide context on the Comintern reactions to both Italian and German fascism in the interwar period, to understand the basis on which the CMF was created. In addition, it will expose the difficulties in confronting the fascist threat created by the Comintern's attacks on the concept of 'social fascism'. Finally, the precursor of the CMF, the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, will be discussed, to explore the early Popular Front strategies which came to influence the Comintern's official policy turn in 1936. This examination of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement will also allow us to understand the foundations of the CMF, its commitment to a movement above parties, and its relationship with the Soviet Union.

#### **Communist Reactions to Italian Fascism**

The Comintern struggled to define the concept of fascism throughout the interwar period. In 1922, when fascists marched on Rome and Mussolini assumed the Prime Ministership of Italy, communist definitions of fascism were fluid. At the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, held in the same year, fascism was variously presented as the 'political enemy of the capitalist bourgeoisie', the 'political offensive of the bourgeoisie against the working class', and as having 'battalions composed of workers, rural proletarians and part of the peasantry'.<sup>1</sup> However, it was

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', *Science and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1967), p. 150 and 'Extracts from a Manifesto to the Italian Workers passed at the opening session of the Fourth Comintern Congress, 5 November 1922', in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International: Documents, Vol. 1, 1919-1922* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 377.



believed that the working classes would 'soon realise how deceptive were the promises which attracted them into this counter-revolutionary adventure and [which] turned them into an army of the landlords against their kindred'.<sup>2</sup> Further, Italian communist theoretician Amadeo Bordiga made it clear that fascism had a strong following everywhere and was 'in no sense limited to the countryside'.<sup>3</sup>

The veteran German communist, Clara Zetkin, was concerned by the Comintern's initial approach to Italian fascism. In a speech to the Executive Committee of the Comintern, Zetkin warned that

'the mistakes of the Communist Party again lie above all in viewing fascism only as a military-terrorist movement and not as a mass movement with deep social roots. It must be expressly emphasised that before Fascism had won militarily, it had already achieved the victory politically and ideologically over the labour movement.'<sup>4</sup>

She noted two defining features which prevailed throughout fascist parties across the globe: first, 'the pretence of a revolutionary programme, which is cleverly adapted to the interests and demands of the large masses', and second, the 'application of the most brutal violence'. However, Zetkin believed that the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) would be 'unable to keep together the forces which helped it to get into power' and would subsequently collapse. She predicted that 'the workers will very soon come back to their class interest and class duty' by rejecting fascism and embracing communism.<sup>5</sup> Amadeo Bordiga, an early member of the *Partito Comunista d'Italia* (PCd'I) and a prominent communist internationalist until his arrest by the PNF in 1926, concurred with Clara Zetkin's view that fascism would collapse under its own contradictions, as fascist ideology had nothing to add 'to the traditional ideology and programme of bourgeois politics' and was 'full of difficulties that it is unable to

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<sup>2</sup> 'Extracts from a Manifesto to the Italian Workers passed at the opening session of the Fourth Comintern Congress, 5 November 1922', in Degras (ed.), *The Communist International: Documents, Vol. 1, 1919-1922*, p. 377.

<sup>3</sup> Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Clara Zetkin, 'Fascism', *Labour Monthly* (August 1923), p. 69 – 78.

overcome'.<sup>6</sup> The communist conception of fascism also centred on the idea that fascism was an indicator of the breakdown of capitalist society, 'one of the classic forms of counter-revolution in the epoch where capitalist society is dying'.<sup>7</sup>

The Comintern's first attempt at a transnational network of activists against fascism was the International Action Committee against War Danger and Fascism (IAC), which was founded at a conference held in Frankfurt from the 17 to 21 March 1923. The primary goals of the IAC included the coordination of information campaigns and the creation of a culture of solidarity against fascist ideology. Kasper Braskén has argued that early anti-fascist initiatives, like the IAC, 'played a pivotal role in the creation of a transnational anti-fascist movement that transferred cultures of anti-fascism across borders in Europe and the world' later in the period.<sup>8</sup> The organisation had two secretaries, Clara Zetkin in Berlin, and Henri Barbusse in Paris, and was backed by prominent artists, intellectuals, and politicians, including Romain Rolland (who would work with Barbusse in setting up the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement in the 1930s), Anatole France, Upton Sinclair and Willi Münzenberg. The IAC was created 'to lead the international propaganda against fascism' and to encourage national communist parties to establish organisations against fascism.<sup>9</sup> The IAC attempted to understand if fascism was simply an Italian phenomenon or if it had the potential to adopt different national characteristics in other countries. It only operated for a short period of time but is historically important because it demonstrates the attempts made in the 1920s at a unified communist anti-fascist movement which would be developed further in the 1930s. The IAC existed only from March 1923 to September 1924 and was hindered in much of its work by bad relations with the Labour and Socialist International, which impacted its popular appeal. This

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<sup>6</sup> Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', p. 411.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Braskén, 'Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923-24', p.574.

<sup>9</sup> Braskén, 'Making Anti-Fascism Transnational: The Origins of Communist and Socialist Articulations of Resistance in Europe, 1923-24', p. 580.

was not unusual; the LSI and Comintern organisations were often in conflict and rarely worked together during the interwar period.<sup>10</sup>

### **Social Fascism and the Shifting Policy of the Comintern**

The Comintern's policies towards the growth of extreme right-wing politics across Europe in the 1920s was consistently in flux. Despite an initial focus on the nuances of Italian fascism, the Comintern began to turn its attention towards the threat posed by 'social fascism' in the late 1920s. The term 'social fascism' was used by communists to refer to social democratic, socialist and labour parties who were 'still the main support of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>11</sup> To further simplify the concept, the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD, German Communist Party) claimed that 'Social Fascism is Socialism in word, Fascism in deed'.<sup>12</sup> Fascism and social democracy were presented as 'the two sides of the same instrument of capitalist dictatorship' and social democrats could 'never be a reliable ally of the fighting proletariat' as they represented a roadblock to any potential collaboration between communists and socialists.<sup>13</sup> The crusade against 'social fascism' called for the 'isolation and destruction of social democracy as a force moving the working class towards fascism', but, in practice, it was the communists who were isolated.<sup>14</sup>

The term was first used to refer to the German Social Democratic Party, but quickly became a major theme of communist rhetoric across Europe throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> A chapter in G.D.H Cole's examination of socialist history provides excellent analysis on the strained relationship between the Comintern and the LSI before 1931: G.D.H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Vol. IV: Communism and Social Democracy 1914 – 1931 Part II* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 680 – 714.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934 – 1935', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1979), p. 676.

<sup>12</sup> Lea Haro, 'Entering a Theoretical Void: The Theory of Social Fascism and Stalinism in the German Communist Party', *Critique*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2011), p. 563.

<sup>13</sup> Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934 – 1935', p. 674.

1920s. The so-called 'Third Period' in the history of the Comintern, from 1928 to around 1934, was defined by an

'extreme political intransigence toward all other political movements, from social democracy to fascism: all of these movements were reduced to a common denominator of their supposed class matrix and every possibility of manoeuvre and political alliance was excluded'.<sup>15</sup>

This desire to eradicate 'social fascism' also shaped how communists confronted full-fledged fascism. The belief that social democracy and fascism were one and the same 'prevented arrival at an analysis of the fascist phenomenon and its peculiar traits', with the consequence that communists did not fully understand the threat and were therefore underequipped to effectively tackle it.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, some members of the Comintern initially created nuanced analyses of the nature of Italian fascism, but by the late 1920s Stalinist orthodoxy and the 'social fascist' crusade had severely impacted how communist intellectuals understood fascism. David Beetham has argued that the Comintern's analysis of fascism after 1928 was a 'conscious rejection of a level of understanding of fascism already available', in that the work done by theoreticians like Zetkin, Karl Radek, Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti on the 'complex social composition and class nature of Italian fascism' was disregarded when it should have been applied to the phenomenon of German fascism.<sup>17</sup> This ultra-left turn in Comintern policy which occurred in 1928 also had real implications for the national communist parties. Andreas Wirsching has argued that the fight against 'social fascism' actually impacted membership numbers, particularly in Germany and France. According to Wirsching, conditions in Germany 'offered incomparably clearer ideological and propagandist points of contact for the thesis of 'social fascism' than in France'. Between 1929 and 1932, the number of KPD members rose from 98,527 to 252,000', while in France, which was far more

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<sup>15</sup> Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920 – 1935', p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> David Beetham, *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 2; McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, p. 111.

syndicalist than its German neighbour, there was a drop from 52,372 members in 1928 to 28,825 in 1933.<sup>18</sup>

The exiled Leon Trotsky also consistently criticised the Comintern in this period for focusing on social democracy over fascism; Robert Wistrich has argued that Trotsky's analysis of fascism 'stands out in the literature of the 1930s as one of the more coherent attempts to describe and forecast the consequences of "this stupendous phenomenon of social psychopathology"'.<sup>19</sup> Trotsky criticised Soviet politicians, including Stalin, who intrinsically linked fascism and social democracy in their speeches.<sup>20</sup> Stalin had claimed that social democracy was 'objectively the moderate wing of fascism' as early as 1924: he argued that 'they are not antipodes, they are twins'.<sup>21</sup> Trotsky claimed that both Mussolini and Hitler had 'displayed initiative, roused the masses to action, [and] pioneered new paths through the political jungle', which Stalin had wholly failed to do.<sup>22</sup> By early 1931, Trotsky was preaching the unity of the left as the only means of success in the fight against fascism; he argued that 'only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory' against fascism'.<sup>23</sup>

## **The Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement**

Despite the ultra-left ideology which defined the policies of the Comintern in its 'Third Period', some attempts were made by communist internationalists to explore

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<sup>18</sup> Andreas Wirsching, 'The Impact of 'Bolshevisation' and 'Stalinisation' on French and German Communism: A Comparative View' in Laporte et al. (eds.), *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917-53*, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> Robert S. Wistrich, 'Leon Trotsky's Theory of Fascism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1976), p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'Germany, the Key to the International Situation', 26.11.1931 [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311126.htm>] Accessed 3.10.2018.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Stalin, 'Concerning the International Situation', 20.09.1924 [<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/09/20.htm>] Accessed 31.10.2018.

<sup>22</sup> Wistrich, 'Leon Trotsky's Theory of Fascism', p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Trotsky, 'For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism', *The Militant*, Vol. V, No. 2 (1932), p. 4. (originally published in Russian on 8 December 1931)

collaboration with members of other parties on the left in contravention of Comintern directives. This was primarily the initiative of Willi Münzenberg, a German communist who was responsible for designing and circulating propaganda on behalf of the Communist International. As a German communist, Münzenberg was acutely aware of how serious the threat of fascism was; he had watched his comrades in the KPD leadership be arrested en masse by the Nazis, leaving only 'uncoordinated activity of isolated pockets of resistance' where a political powerhouse had once stood. Münzenberg also understood that a party which had polled 6 million votes would not simply disappear by itself, and as such a programme of concerted action was necessary. He enjoyed a unique, 'semi-autonomous' position in the German and international communist movements which allowed him a level of freedom in his work and afforded him the ability to engage with non-communists which was essential for Popular Front work.<sup>24</sup>

The Amsterdam-Pleyel movement is a prime example of an unofficial Popular Front organisation created by Münzenberg before it became Comintern policy in 1936. The rise of German fascism in the early 1930s had begun to force communists to reassess how they conceptualised their relationships with 'bourgeois' parties; mass auxiliary organisations like the World Committee against Imperialist War, formed in Amsterdam in August 1932 and the European Workers' Anti-Fascist Union, formed at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in June 1933 under the guidance of Comintern propagandist Willi Münzenberg, allowed rank-and-file communists to explore collaboration with non-communists on anti-fascist and anti-war activities without officially committing to an alliance. They also allowed Münzenberg to demonstrate the utility of a Popular Front strategy to his bosses in the Comintern, without officially linking the International to the strategy, should it fail. These two committees merged

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<sup>24</sup> Helmut Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg: Propagandist for and against the Comintern', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1965), p. 189.

into the World Committee against War and Fascism later in 1933 (referred to in this thesis as the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement), which was headed by prominent western European intellectuals including Henri Barbusse (who was involved in earlier Comintern efforts against Italian fascism) and Romain Rolland.

The Amsterdam committee has been identified by historians as Münzenberg's 'most spectacular success' because it was the most significant application of his ability to harness 'individuals and groups of widely differing political complexions' to covertly communist organisations which tackled various humanitarian issues.<sup>25</sup> The Amsterdam congress was a fundamentally diverse attempt to gather intellectuals and workers from across Europe to discuss imperialist war, and, in some ways, predated the Popular Front strategy adopted in the mid-1930s. The congress, held in Amsterdam from 27 to 30 August 1932, gathered 2,200 delegates from 25 different countries to protest capitalism and imperialist war.<sup>26</sup> The vast bulk of delegates came from Germany, France and Holland, with 35%, 27% and 21% of delegates respectively.<sup>27</sup> The social and political composition of the congress was also deliberately diverse and demonstrated Münzenberg's attempts to extend the scope of the congress beyond communist concerns and into the realm of pacifism. Communists were the largest political group at the congress by over 500 attendees, but those without party affiliation were the largest proportion of attendees overall.<sup>28</sup> This demonstrated that the goal of the organisers that the meeting be 'above parties' was at least somewhat successfully achieved; however, some socialist and labour leaders believed that the congress's primary 'purpose was to create propaganda for the Soviet Union and to disrupt the socialist parties all over Europe' and they were

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<sup>25</sup> Helmut Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg's German Communist Propaganda Empire 1921 – 1933', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1966), p. 291; and Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg: Propagandist for and against the Comintern', p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Jocelyne Prezeau, 'Le mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934). Un champ d'essai du front unique', *Cahiers d'histoire de l'IRM*, No. 18 (1984), p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix D for full table.

therefore were reluctant to engage with the group.<sup>29</sup> However, there has been some discussion amongst historians about whether the Amsterdam congress was truly intended to be a gathering of all parties; Jacques Bari  ty agrees with a number of French historians that it would be a ‘complete anachronism’ to present the Amsterdam congress as the first step towards the Popular Front. Bari  ty argues that the meeting actually had the opposite effect, essentially isolating the PCF further from the French left in the months following.<sup>30</sup>

The decision to hold the congress was triggered by Japanese aggression in Chinese Manchuria from September 1931, and as such the major theme of the congress was the rejection of war as a capitalist tool of oppression. The slogan chosen to embody the direction of the congress was ‘*Pacifisme Combattant!*’ (‘Combative Pacifism!’) which evoked a contradictory image of a violent struggle for peace. Confirming this, many traditional pacifist methods were criticised as ‘foredoomed to failure’ and ‘unfortunately futile’ by the congress. Conscientious objection was presented as men ‘fling[ing] themselves... against a collective disaster’ and was criticised for having no real effect on the struggle against war.<sup>31</sup> Daniel Brower has argued that this rejection of traditional pacifist methods in favour of more violent means meant that the Amsterdam Committee could not be considered an ‘effective mass movement’ because it preached a violent pacifism which conflicted with ‘the almost visceral distaste of left-wing western Europeans for any kind of fighting’.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> David James Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Bari  ty, ‘Les pacifistes fran  ais et le mouvement ‘Amsterdam-Pleyel’ 1930 – 1935’, in Mikhail Narinksi et al., *La France et l’URSS dans l’Europe des ann  es 30* (Paris : Presses de l’Universit   Paris Sorbonne, 2005), p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Manifesto of the Amsterdam World Congress against Imperialist War’ (27 – 29 August 1932), Pandor, 543\_1\_18, Doc. 84, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel H. Brower, *The New Jacobins: The French Communist Party and the Popular Front* (Ithaca: New York, 1968), p. 17.



The Soviet press covered the Amsterdam congress extensively; many newspapers in the Soviet Union published the Manifesto of the Amsterdam congress and the communication sent by Maxim Gorky to the meeting as a result of his inability to procure a Dutch visa to attend. *Trud*, *Izvestia*, and *Pravda* all presented the Amsterdam congress as a victory against absolute western pacifism, 'which would like to distract the proletariat from fighting against imperialism... by the promise to guarantee peace by pacifist panaceas of all kinds'. *Pravda* specifically wrote that the Amsterdam meeting demonstrated that the 'petty bourgeoisie and the intellectuals' were disappointed by the 'sterility of pacifist phraseology' and that the proletariat had 'managed to detach... the intellectuals... from the bourgeoisie'.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the Amsterdam congress did not hide its preference towards the Soviet Union; it emphasised the necessity of defending the USSR against capitalist aggression on all fronts and lambasted the aggressive capitalist nations who were attempting to 'undermine and overthrow' the 'peaceful' Soviet Union in its manifesto. It highlighted attacks made by capitalist powers on the USSR in the past, including 'wars of intervention, encirclements and blockades, armed attacks supported by Western imperialism, the raising of White Guards in Europe and Asia, attempts at destruction by sabotage within the Soviet Union, [and] unprecedented campaigns of calumny and defamation' carried out under the 'flimsy cover of diplomatic relations' for the 'sake of immediate financial advantage'.<sup>34</sup> The congress also expressed the belief that a 'final crusade' on the Soviet Union was being prepared in the form of a Japanese attack. In contrast with the violent capitalist powers, the Soviet Union was praised for having a 'steadfast peace policy', despite continued attacks on the country's sovereignty. According to the congress, this narrative of a sustained attack on the Soviet Union by non-communist nations disproved the myth of 'red imperialism'

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<sup>33</sup> Alexandre Réviakine, 'L'URSS et le mouvement d'Amsterdam Pleyel', in Narinksi et al., *La France et l'URSS dans l'Europe des années 30*, pp. 102 – 103.

<sup>34</sup> 'Manifesto of the Amsterdam World Congress against Imperialist War', p.1.

created by capitalist governments to 'mask the[ir] persistent attacks against the Republic of workers and peasants'.<sup>35</sup> This commitment to the defence of the USSR demonstrated the preoccupation which had existed throughout the interwar period in the work of communist front organisations about the survival of the Soviet state, which would also be a characteristic of the CMF's work.<sup>36</sup>

The European Workers' Anti-Fascist congress, held at the Salle Pleyel in Paris in June 1933, was a larger meeting which was more focused on the threat of fascism than the prevention of an imperialist war. It brought together 3,200 delegates from 13 countries, the majority of whom were recorded as '*sans parti*' in a similar manner to the Amsterdam meeting, with more than half of the delegates identifying as such. However, the number of delegates to the Pleyel congress who identified themselves as socialists fell while the number of communists grew, quickly leading to accusations that the meeting was a 'communist congress'.<sup>37</sup> The number of socialist attendees dropped by about 100, and combined with the higher number of attendees, the number of communist participants overwhelmed the socialists. Despite this, the *International Communist* newspaper, again published in the USSR, wrote that 'the antifascist congress in Paris [was] a powerful demonstration of proletarian solidarity and of Marxism. The spirit of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin was widespread in the Salle Pleyel despite the efforts of all the fascists, of all the social-democrats, of all the pacifists and social-pacifists'.<sup>38</sup> As demonstrated by this quote, the Comintern was not quite ready to break with the social fascist crusade which defined the third period at that point; however, it had begun to accept the necessity of confronting the fascist threat.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>37</sup> Prezeau, 'Le Mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934) : Un champ d'essai du Front unique', p. 91 ; See Appendix E for full table.

<sup>38</sup> Réviakine, 'L'URSS et le mouvement d'Amsterdam Pleyel', p. 106.

The Pleyel congress was the site of a major confrontation between two ideological strands on how to conduct the anti-fascist struggle. The former French Radical Party politician, Gaston Bergery, developed a 'common front' approach to anti-fascism, which combined the strengths of the middle and working classes to fight fascism, as opposed to the communist approach of the organisers of the Pleyel congress, who inherently mistrusted the middle classes. Bergery believed that the anti-fascist struggle had to engage the middle class on an equal footing to strengthen the movement. However, Jacques Doriot, the communist mayor of Saint-Denis, did not deny the importance of the 'petit-bourgeoisie' in the anti-fascist struggle, but 'subordinated their role [and] their influence' to the proletariat. Doriot believed that the conflict was actually about the internationalist spirit of the subsequent movement: 'it's a matter of whether the struggle will be inspired completely by proletarian internationalism or if it will be managed in the narrowness of national paths'.<sup>39</sup> Jacques Doriot would eventually be expelled from the PCF in 1934 because he was too open in his advocacy of a Popular Front strategy before it became official policy; Doriot went on to found the fascist *Parti Populaire Français* (PPF) in 1936 after his expulsion from the PCF, and collaborated with the Nazis and the Vichy government during the occupation of France during the Second World War.

The Amsterdam and Pleyel committees merged on 15 June 1933 to become the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, a move which was confirmed by the Political Bureau of the Comintern two days later. By the end of 1933, the number of local Amsterdam-Pleyel committees across France exceeded 700 with an unknown number also being set up across Europe, the United States and Australia. However, the proliferation of committees against fascism and war slowed after the Pleyel congress. Only 95 local committees were created between July 1933 and February

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<sup>39</sup> Prezeau, 'Le Mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934) : Un champ d'essai du Front unique', p. 93; For more on Jacques Doriot's political development, see Gilbert D. Allardyce, 'The Political Transition of Jacques Doriot', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1966), pp. 56 – 74.

1934, compared to the 207 committees created between January and June 1933. Committees were also not spread equally across France; 26 *départements* did not have their own committee against fascism, while the Parisian, Midi and Seine-Maritime regions were popular locations for committees.<sup>40</sup> This can partly be traced to the movement's continued poor relationship with the socialists: the secretary of the LSI, Friedrich Adler, was suspicious of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement from the start and rejected any collaboration with the group. He wrote of his 'sad[ness] that, today, when the true and loyal collaboration of all forces of the proletariat is necessary more than ever, we always get more of the small and infantile... united front manoeuvres'.<sup>41</sup> In addition, it is important to note that Henri Barbusse also often complained about the lack of sufficient funding provided by the Comintern to the movement, which severely impacted its ability to expand. Barbusse expressed his belief that 'our movement, now more necessary than ever... becomes anaemic, restricted and paralysed by the lack of new resources', which indisputably prevented the movement from being able to 'multiply, diversify, and intensify its activity'.<sup>42</sup>

Despite its issues, the Amsterdam-Pleyel group was indicative of the growing desire amongst activists on the left to explore Popular Front solutions to the threat of fascism before it became official Comintern policy. It is also evidence of attempts made by the Comintern to create organisations which were inherently concerned with the defence of the USSR. Further, the CMF can be described as being inspired by the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement: Gabrielle Duchêne was intimately involved with the Amsterdam congress as she read Romain Rolland's 'Declaration to the World Congress' at the opening session of the meeting in 1932 in his absence, in which Rolland identified himself as explicitly pacifist and 'underscored the educational value'

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<sup>40</sup> Prezeau, 'Le Mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934) : Un champ d'essai du Front unique', pp. 92 – 95.

<sup>41</sup> Laqua, 'Democratic Politics and the League of Nations: The Labour and Socialist International as a Protagonist of Interwar Internationalism', p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> Réviakine, 'L'URSS et le mouvement d'Amsterdam Pleyel', p. 113.

of the Amsterdam congress.<sup>43</sup> The CMF has often been presented as the women's section of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, but this was not the case; the two groups operated almost entirely separately, with the CMF focusing exclusively on women's issues while the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement was intended to play a role in the international communist movement against fascism generally. However, what is clear is that the CMF followed the strategies innovated by the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement and its founders, but with its own gendered approach.

### **Historiography of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement**

Historians have been interested in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement because of the particular phenomena which allowed the two initial congresses to take place. First, the Amsterdam-Pleyel committee attracted many high-profile participants from intellectual circles who brought the group publicity in the European press. The congress was organised by French novelists Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland, who encouraged Albert Einstein, Heinrich Mann, Bertrand Russell, Upton Sinclair and other prominent intellectuals to put their names to congress appeals.<sup>44</sup> It was Romain Rolland who insisted on a 'pluralistic anti-imperialist, anti-war coalition' for the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement and who wanted 'pacifists, progressives, nonconforming individuals, and class-conscious intellectuals' to be included, principles which also governed preparations for CMF congresses.<sup>45</sup> Second, the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement's clear affiliation to the Comintern propaganda Tsar Willi Münzenberg has attracted the attention of historians of international communism. Helmut Gruber, Sean McMeekin and Stephen Koch have each explored Münzenberg's efforts to create a network of communist front organisations across Europe, a feat which demonstrated his 'remarkable inventiveness as a publicist and

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<sup>43</sup> Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918-1939* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1987), p. 80.

<sup>45</sup> Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*, p. 160.

[his] superior talent for organisation'. In this context, Gruber has labelled the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement as one of the most 'powerful propaganda networks' created by Münzenberg in the interwar period, while Koch has described the Amsterdam congress as the 'high point in Münzenberg's capacity to draw the left in general into the Soviets' gravitational field'.<sup>46</sup> Further, Münzenberg was an innovator in using Popular Front tactics as a foundation for his propaganda efforts; he 'followed a united front policy [in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement]... [which] was nothing else than the Popular Front idea which [Georgi] Dimitrov [leader of the Comintern from 1935 to 1943] made the dictum of the Comintern... in 1935'.<sup>47</sup>

However, both Koch and McMeekin have been criticised for approaching their studies of Münzenberg from a strongly anti-communist perspective, while McMeekin has also been criticised for not giving adequate attention to Münzenberg's anti-fascist work. Further, he also made sensationalist claims about Münzenberg's legacy in his monograph on the propaganda chief, in which he assigns blame to Münzenberg for the effectiveness of modern terrorist organisations. McMeekin has suggested that Münzenberg 'helped to unleash a plague of moral blindness upon the world from which we have still not recovered... the kinds of fronts Münzenberg invented – redundant, self-replicating cultural committees... are now exploited by the world's most formidable terrorist organisations'.<sup>48</sup>

The final reason that the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement has attracted scholarly attention is the fact that the movement was socially diverse, bringing together prominent intellectuals and workers in a coalition which resembled the Popular Front strategy later adopted by the Comintern. French historians have taken the lead in this regard. Jocelyn Prezeau in particular has examined the Amsterdam-Pleyel group

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<sup>46</sup> Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg's German Communist Propaganda Empire 1921 – 1933', p. 278; and Stephen Koch, *Stalin, Willi Münzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Gruber, 'Willi Münzenberg: Propagandist for and against the Comintern', p. 195.

<sup>48</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 307.

from below rather than above, discussing how the movement attracted the most diverse group of people possible to its cause. However, Prezeau has argued that the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement was ineffectual, as it was unable to 'reorient itself from a struggle against exterior fascism to a struggle against internal fascism' after the far-right riots in Paris in February 1934.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, Yves Santamaria has examined the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement through the nuances of French political conflicts in the 1930s, particularly regarding the tumultuous influence of the PCF.<sup>50</sup>

The historiography on the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement is particularly lacking a gendered perspective which examines the women who contributed to the movement. These studies focus entirely on the male-dominated Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, with little mention of the women who contributed to it, let alone the separate women's committee which was formed in its image. In addition, the input of individuals from outside France is neglected entirely except with regards to the participation of the few prominent non-French intellectuals. English language studies of the mixed-gender movement against war and fascism only cover its presence in Australia.<sup>51</sup> No dedicated studies of the core organisation or its wider presence in Europe are available in English, an unfortunate roadblock to further study of the Amsterdam-Pleyel group and a hindrance to any studies of the CMF, which both organisations certainly deserve.

The Amsterdam-Pleyel movement was perhaps one of the earliest examples of a Popular Front movement in the 1930s, an attempt at unity amongst the left, which

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<sup>49</sup> Prezeau, 'Le mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934). Un champ d'essai du front unique', p. 96; see also Jocelyne Prezeau, 'Vers l'unité antifasciste : le rôle d'Amsterdam-Pleyel', *Cahiers d'histoire de l'Institut Maurice Thorez*, no. 10 (1974), pp. 55 – 64.

<sup>50</sup> Yves Santamaria, 'Un prototype toutes missions : le Comité de lutte contre la guerre, dit 'Amsterdam-Pleyel' 1932 – 1936', *Communisme*, No. 18 -19 (1988), pp. 71 – 97 ; Yves Santamaria, 'Intellectuals, Pacifism, and Communism : The Mandarins and the Struggle for Peace (1914 – 53), in Jeremy Jennings (ed.), *Intellectuals in Twentieth Century France : Mandarins and Samurai* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 117 -139.

<sup>51</sup> David Rose, 'The Movement against War and Fascism, 1933-1939', *Labour History*, No. 38 (1980), pp. 76 – 90; Len Fox, 'The Movement against War and Fascism: A View from Inside', *Labour History*, No. 39 (1980), pp. 78 – 82.

was hindered by its obvious communist links. It was this movement that spurred the creation of the CMF; the CMF essentially adopted the name of the World Committee against War and Fascism, and broadly followed the same principles of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, but it was created because its founders believed women were not receiving ample attention in the larger organisation. The next chapter in the thesis will begin to discuss the work of the CMF through the women who lead it, in order to understand the specific motivations driving the group.



## Chapter Two

### The Leaders of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*

The work that *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* pursued in the 1930s was primarily directed by four impressive, politically motivated women, imbuing the committee with a purpose which was heavily influenced by the backgrounds of each. The success of the CMF was dependant on close collaboration amongst its activists and an ability to foster both national and international contacts. To understand the actions and goals of the CMF during its short lifetime, it is necessary to explore the backgrounds, political affiliations and connections of four women who played major roles in the committee.

Bernadette Cattané, the CMF's international secretary general, was born in Brélèvenez in the Côtes-du-Nord on 25 February 1899. Due to her family's poverty, she only attended primary school until the age of twelve, but the socialist, anti-clericalist leanings of her teacher there influenced her political outlook from an early age. She eventually travelled to Rennes where she cultivated friendships in the academic community, although she did not attend university herself. By the age of twenty she had moved to Paris, where she met her husband, Jean-Baptiste Cattané, an accountant, with whom she had two children. By the end of 1923, Bernadette and Jean-Baptiste had joined the PCF, and Bernadette Cattané began to play a key role in the work of the party amongst women.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, the early political education of the other three women was heavily influenced by the Dreyfus affair. Charles Sowerwine has argued that the Dreyfus Affair in France 'began a new era of mass politics, thanks to the growth of mass

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<sup>1</sup> René Lemarquis and Claude Pennetier, 'CATTANÉO Bernadette [née LE LOARER Marie, Bernadette]', in *Le Maitron*, Last modified 4 August 2015 [<http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article18996>], accessed 1.2.2017.

media', which saw 'the collapse of monarchist hope... [and] the consolidation of the Republic'.<sup>2</sup> However, it also 'catalysed the formation of a new right, fusing anti-Semitism and nationalism with resentment against the new economic order'.<sup>3</sup> The president of the CMF, Gabrielle Duchêne, was the only CMF leader who was an adult when the Dreyfus affair occurred. Duchêne, born on 26 February 1870, had grown up comfortably bourgeois in Paris. She married the prominent landscape architect, Achille Duchêne, who designed the grounds of numerous large chateaux, including the water terraces at Blenheim Palace and several gardens in stately homes across France over the course of his career.<sup>4</sup> The Duchênes were 'ardent Dreyfusards', who became 'an embarrassment to both family and friends' after Dreyfus's conviction on espionage charges was upheld in 1899.<sup>5</sup> Michael Marrus has argued that ardent Dreyfusards, who stood for 'justice and the individual', fought for his acquittal 'whatever reasons of state and military prestige stood in the way'.<sup>6</sup> The Dreyfus affair galvanised Gabrielle Duchêne into a political activism which was defined by its mass character and its opposition to injustices perpetuated by the right wing.

The leader of the British section of the CMF, who would later become president of the Women's Committee for Peace and Democracy (the CMF's successor), was Charlotte Haldane. Born on 27 April 1894 in Sydenham, South-East London to an American mother and a German-Jewish businessman father, the Dreyfus Affair influenced her early political education, introducing her to the issue of anti-Semitism early in her life and making it 'a permanent part of her seemingly protected Edwardian bourgeois world'.<sup>7</sup> She recounted in her autobiography that she

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Society and the Making of the Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 66 and 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> 'Achille Duchêne' [<http://www.haduchene.com/Les-Duchene/Achille-Duchene-1866-1947/>], Accessed 30.07.2018.

<sup>5</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p.142.

<sup>6</sup> Michael R. Marrus, "'En Famille": The Dreyfus Affair and Its Myths', *French Politics and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1994), pp. 77 – 78.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Adamson, *Charlotte Haldane: Woman Writer in a Man's World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 6.

'knew about anti-Semitism long before [she] learned the facts of life'. By 1906, when French courts had quashed Dreyfus' conviction for good, Haldane was intimately familiar with 'the most dramatic racial and international controversy' of the fin-de-siècle period. She cited this 'impersonal cause' as 'perhaps [the] most significant' in making her an anti-fascist in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Haldane lived in Antwerp, Belgium, for five years from the age of ten, after which she returned to London as 'an atheist and ardent feminist'.<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Haldane was an accomplished journalist and author, who met her future husband, the prominent scientist J.B.S. Haldane while undertaking research for her seminal science fiction dystopia *Man's World* (1926).

Maria Rabaté, the secretary of the French section of the CMF, was also brought up in an atmosphere which was strongly shaped by Dreyfusard politics. She was born in Moncontour in the La Vienne *département* of centre-west France on 3 July 1900 to parents who were politically active teachers. Her first knowledge of politics came when her father expressed his indignation towards the 'clerical, militarist forces of the past' who condemned Dreyfus; Rabaté recalled an occasion when her father instructed her to walk 80km just to listen to the socialist, anti-militarist leader Jean Jaurès speak. She recounted that, as a 'profound' pacifist himself, her father was 'both revolted and overwhelmed' by the announcement of Jaurès' assassination in July 1914.<sup>10</sup> Like Cattaneo, Rabaté also found some of her early political inspiration from two of her female professors at the *école normale* at Chateauroux which she attended from 1916, particularly regarding pacifism. By 1921, Rabaté had joined the fledgling PCF and the communist *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU) to undertake trade union work amongst women. It was at the C.G.T.U. national congress in Bordeaux in September 1927 that she met her

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Haldane, *Truth Will Out* (London: Peal, Ashdown and Hart Ltd., 1949), pp. 2 – 3.

<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline Hurlley and Elizabeth Russel, 'Women against Fascism: Nancy Cunard and Charlotte Haldane', *BELLS: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 7 (1996), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Willard, 'Témoignage : Maria Rabaté, une femme communiste', *Cahiers d'histoire Maurice Thorez* (1979), p. 172.

companion and collaborator in communist politics, Octave Rabaté. Together they represented a *tour de force* in communist politics in the interwar period and beyond.

These four women all underwent different journeys to political activism, but found themselves united in their anti-fascist convictions: Cattaneo and Rabaté were both working class, and discovered their political stance through their educational experiences; Haldane's origins were bourgeois, but her Jewish heritage impacted how she perceived politics from an early age; and Duchêne was comfortably bourgeoisie, but she chose to immerse herself in politics after being galvanised by the Dreyfus Affair. However, despite their differences these women became key actors in the CMF in the 1930s precisely because of their political background and relationship with the communist party. This chapter will consider how these women reached this divergent stage of their careers, and how their experiences in national and international communist politics influenced the development of the CMF. It will also explore some of the connections held by these women, to consider how far the CMF was linked with other prominent activists of the period.

### **Early Activism and Interactions with Communism**

Gabrielle Duchêne's introduction to activism came when women were still largely prevented from participating in official politics across the globe. After the political lesson that she had received during the Dreyfus Affair, Duchêne made the jump into social activism by organising the co-operative *Entr'aide* in 1908, which represented the lingerie and dress-makers of France, who were typically low-income women. Valérie Daly identified Duchêne's work with *Entr'aide* as the beginning of her 'long, independent crusade to work for the less fortunate, for which she earned a reputation as a "*bourgeoisie impossible*".<sup>11</sup> Her husband, Achille Duchêne, helped to fund the

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<sup>11</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 123.

work of *Entr'aide*, and was the deputy treasurer of another of her organisations, the *Office français du travail à domicile*.<sup>12</sup> It is unknown to what extent Achille knew about or supported his wife's close relationship with communist activists in the interwar period, but he was central to her early work as a labour activist.

Duchêne soon became involved in feminist activism which would define her work for the rest of her life. In 1913, she was made the president of the labour section of the *Conseil National des Femmes Françaises* (CNFF), and in 1915 joined WILPF, assuming the role of president of the French section from the outset.<sup>13</sup> This marked her first interaction with pacifism which, although consistently fluctuating, was a feature of her personal ideology from this point on. Andrée Jouve, a member of the French section of WILPF, described Duchêne's doctrine as 'simple: listen to the revolt of the heart against injustice, collect the facts, criticise them, then devote all one's strength to the struggle against that injustice, which is engendered and perpetuated by life, society, and war.'<sup>14</sup> As such, when the Bolshevik revolution occurred in October 1917, Duchêne hoped that it would 'sweep away all social injustices and wars' and create gender and economic equality.<sup>15</sup>

Duchêne's interest in the social experiment in the USSR was cemented after a visit she made to the country in 1927 with the CGTU, the communist trade union organisation, which she engaged with during her labour activism. Sylvia Margulies in her study of the 'pilgrimages' made by foreigners to the USSR has argued that Soviet authorities showed 'the best that they had and urged their guests to generalise from

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<sup>12</sup> Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> For more on WILPF, see Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League For Peace And Freedom 1915 - 1965* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1980); Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Feminist Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Sarah Hellowell, 'Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women's International League, 1915-1935', (PhD: Northumbria University, Newcastle, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 128.

those unrepresentative conditions'.<sup>16</sup> For example, Duchêne's delegation was provided with the best accommodation and was accompanied by a guide to prevent problematic deviations from the itinerary. That is not to say that the veneer did not slip, however. During Duchêne's second trip to the Soviet Union in 1936, she was touring the Soviet prison at Bolshevo, where street children, criminals, and drug addicts (2,200 in 1933) were sent to be rehabilitated and trained as 'skilled craftsmen'.<sup>17</sup> However, Duchêne was mistakenly taken to the dormitory for bachelors, 'the worst place' in the Bolshevo 'secret police commune'.<sup>18</sup> Her interpreter, Ghilyarevskaya, excused the mistake by claiming that 'it was a dormitory for inmates who had just arrived and who hadn't settled in yet'.<sup>19</sup> The group also had the 'bad luck' of meeting someone who could speak French, which led to many 'conversational asides' between Duchêne and the individual that the guides tried to contain. Regardless of these deviations, Duchêne said that, 'despite her age, she would stay at Bolshevo'.<sup>20</sup> Lorraine Coons has accused Duchêne of a 'political naiveté which clouded her ability to be objective about Stalin's increased brutalities' because she prioritised women's emancipation above all else.<sup>21</sup> For example, in an article titled '*La Femme en URSS*', Duchêne referenced the achievements of the 6,000 women kolkhoz directors, but she failed to draw attention to the brutal results of Stalin's policies.<sup>22</sup> Duchêne perfectly fit the mould of the western female intellectual that the Soviet Union wanted to attract: someone who would ignore the less positive aspects of the regime because of the 'gains' made towards women's emancipation.

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<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. 197.

<sup>17</sup> Michael David Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 161-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920 - 40: From Red Square to the Left Bank*, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia*, p. 198; For more on the Bolshevo commune, see G. Khillig, 'A.S. Makarenko and the Bolshevo Commune', *Russian Education and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 9 (2002), pp. 75-92.

<sup>21</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p.132.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132.

Charlotte Haldane, on the other hand, became politicised on her return to London from Belgium in 1910, a tumultuous year for the British labour force: the coal miners of South Wales went on strike, as did English seamen, dockers, and railway workers, while the suffragettes had begun to intensify their attempts to gain the right to vote.<sup>23</sup> These events introduced Haldane to the feminism and socialism which became the key ideologies of her life. She became a journalist, writing for national newspapers including the *Daily Express*, through which she met her future husband, the eminent biologist J.B.S. Haldane, by visiting him at the University of Cambridge for an interview and to ask him for 'biological sources' for her dystopian novel, *Man's World*.<sup>24</sup> They were soon married, but Charlotte felt uncomfortable in the 'overwhelmingly Conservative in politics and orthodox in religion' Trinity College.<sup>25</sup> Despite the desire of many intellectuals of the period to stay remote from politics, Charlotte and J.B.S. Haldane were both long time socialists who were interested in the USSR, beginning with their first visit to the country in the summer of 1928. By the time of the rise of the Nazi party in the early 1930s, the Haldanes were secret communists and forging valuable contacts in the international communist movement, which will be discussed in the next section.

In contrast to the bourgeois upbringing of Duchêne and Haldane, Cattanéó and Rabaté each originated in the working-class. Cattanéó moved to Paris as an adult, where she frequented intellectual circles in the city, often spending time in the university district in spite of her primary school level education. It was at her job at the *Pharmacie Bailly* on the Rue de Rome that she met her husband and future partner in communist politics, Jean-Baptiste Cattanéó, who was an accountant there. The Cattanéós were a poor family; Bernadette spoke of how, during a particularly trying time financially, she had to work until the day before she gave birth to her first child

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<sup>23</sup> Adamson, *Charlotte Haldane: Woman Writer in a Man's World*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Clark, *J.B.S.: The Life and Work of J.B.S. Haldane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Adamson, *Charlotte Haldane: Woman Writer in a Man's World*, p. 89.

and returned to work only eleven days later. At the *Pharmacie*, Bernadette was the head of a department, and immediately demanded better treatment of the workers who 'were very exploited there'. When management refused, Cattaneo helped to organise her first strike of around 600 employees.<sup>26</sup> Both Cattaneo and her husband were dismissed from their posts at the *Pharmacie* in 1925 as a result of Bernadette's role in the strike agitation.

Cattaneo soon joined the CGTU and contributed to its newspaper, *La Vie Ouvrière*. From 1924, she was a member of the *Commission féminine* of the CGTU and became its secretary in 1929. The *Commission féminine* aimed to bring women into the 'army of social revolution' by establishing local CGTU women's committees in France and launching a women's newspaper entitled *L'Ouvrière*. This paper was created partly because it was deemed that the main CGTU paper was issuing directives 'that women workers will not understand', and so it spoke to women in a more simplistic tone, with explicitly gendered language to attract the largest possible female audience.<sup>27</sup> Only 8 percent of CGTU members in 1936 were women, a fact which Siân Reynolds has argued was due to 'the culture, vocabulary, working practices and pride in status which so clearly marked ... the CGTU ... [which was] not on the face of it easily accessible to women workers'.<sup>28</sup>

Cattaneo organised a variety of strikes during her career, including strikes in 1930 which engaged 20,000 workers from the textile factories of northern France.<sup>29</sup> She also organised the strike at the Bréguet aviation factory in Le Havre during the May Day strikes of 1936, where an impressive 90% of the workforce went on strike.<sup>30</sup> As a result, Cattaneo was often one of the CGTU's preferred choices 'when it needed

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<sup>26</sup> Pudal and Penner, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Pudal and Penner, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 76.



to send a militant' to 'animate strike movements in the four corners of France'.<sup>31</sup> Alongside her role in the trade union movement, Cattaneo had become involved with women's issues in the PCF, a role which would eventually extend to the Comintern.<sup>32</sup> By the time Cattaneo made her first visit to the Soviet Union on the occasion of the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1929, she was the main activist responsible for tackling women's questions in the PCF. Bernadette Cattaneo was never simply viewed as the 'wife of' a party activist by her communist comrades; rather, the Cattaneos shared the burden of much of Bernadette's political work, although Jean-Baptiste avoided 'putting himself forward' into the spotlight.<sup>33</sup> This allowed Bernadette to play a prominent role on the international communist movement which involved much travelling, despite having two young children.

Maria Rabaté first entered politics by campaigning for the women's section of the CGTU in the Indre region, during which she met her companion and lifelong collaborator, Octave Rabaté, in 1927. He too was engaged in the communist trade union movement, and was promoted to the Executive Committee of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern) to coordinate action in Spain and Latin America. Maria Rabaté found herself in a 'scandalous' situation soon after meeting her partner: forced to leave her teaching position, she was unmarried, pregnant, an 'anti-conformist who was very open to feminism' and consistently dressed in a provocative way, 'draped in a black cloak lined with red!'<sup>34</sup> To further exacerbate their situation, Octave was sought by the French police as a result of his communist agitation, leading the couple to flee to the relative safety of Moscow.

The Rabatés lived in Moscow from February 1930 to November 1931, where Maria performed office work for the Comintern while Octave continued his Profintern

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<sup>31</sup> Pudal and Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : Les engagements des communistes français*, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Lemarquis and Pennetier label her as the '*responsable femme*' of the PCF in Lemarquis and Pennetier, 'CATTANÉO Bernadette [née LE LOARER Marie, Bernadette]'.  
<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Rabaté, *Octave et Maria : Du Komintern à la Résistance* (Pantin : Le Temps des Cerises, 2007), p. 43.

work. Maria avoided falling in with the French émigrés who had relocated to Moscow, preferring instead to live ‘to the maximum amongst the Soviets’. She complemented the ‘revolutionary enthusiasm’ of the Soviet youth, but also complained about how collectivisation had created ‘supply’ problems in the winter of 1930 to 1931.<sup>35</sup> However, Maria often spent long periods of time separated from Octave because of the international nature of his work, meaning that she was largely responsible for raising her young family; for example, a few days after her initial arrival in the USSR in February 1930, Octave left for Spain to participate in the organisation of a ‘day of metallurgy’.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, the Rabatés received permission to move the entire family to Barcelona, which Maria credits with allowing her to do an ‘apprenticeship in underground life’, which will be expanded upon later in the chapter.<sup>37</sup>

Cattanéo, Rabaté and Haldane all were all self-described communists by the time that the CMF was founded in August 1934, so it is necessary to consider, what was the nature of Gabrielle Duchêne’s personal political ideology? Yves Santamaria has argued that Gabrielle Duchêne should be considered a ‘crypto-communist’ who secretly supported the Soviet regime, while Valérie Daly and Emmanuelle Carle have argued that she should instead be labelled as a fellow-traveller, who ‘accepted part of the public programme of the Communist Party, but who was not a member’.<sup>38</sup> Why, despite her obvious links to communists, did Gabrielle Duchêne avoid joining the PCF? There are three reasons which can explain why she chose to stay neutral. First, Valérie Daly has claimed that Achille Duchêne was ‘little inclined’ to finance communistic, potentially subversive activities due to the couple’s bourgeois

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<sup>35</sup> Willard, ‘Témoignage : Maria Rabaté, une femme communiste’, pp. 174 – 175.

<sup>36</sup> Rabaté, *Octave et Maria : Du Komintern à la Résistance*, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>38</sup> Santamaria, ‘Intellectuals, Pacifism and Communism: The Mandarins and the Struggle for Peace (1914-53)’, in Jennings (ed.), *Intellectuals in Twentieth Century France: Mandarins and Samurais*, p. 126; Carle, ‘Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d’une autre route : entre le pacifisme féministe et l’antifascisme’, p. 185; and Cauter, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, p. 5.

heritage.<sup>39</sup> However, it should be noted that Duchêne was an accomplished public speaker, who was employed to speak by a variety of different organisations and had some personal income, and thus was probably not entirely reliant on her husband. It is therefore unlikely that her husband's financial support alone would prevent her from joining the PCF.

Second, the attitude of the PCF toward women was not always progressive, something which was an issue across left-wing parties in France in this period. Suzanne Collette and Suzanne Lacore, who were both members of the SFIO, complained that women were often forced 'into a straightjacket of male behaviour in order to function at all... a masculine psychology and culture predominated in all local sections making female party members feel unwelcome'.<sup>40</sup> In the PCF, the number of women members declined across the 1920s, from 2,600 in 1924 (3 or 4%), to 964 in 1926 (1.7%), and only 200 in 1929 (0.6%). The PCF did not keep membership figures in the 1930s, but it is likely that there was an increase in women members during the Popular Front period.<sup>41</sup> However, despite this, Duchêne still supported aspects of communism. She admired the Soviet approach to women's emancipation, and she identified an attractive camaraderie in communist politics. The belief that the struggle for a communist society would be fought with likeminded individuals across the world provided many activists with a sense of purpose and self-assurance', and Duchêne was no exception.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Valérie Daly, 'Gabrielle Duchêne ou 'La Bourgeoisie impossible'', (Masters Thesis : Université de Paris-X, Nanterre, 1984), p. 192.

<sup>40</sup> Helmut Gruber, 'French Women in the Crossfire of Class, Sex, Maternity and Citizenship', in Gruber and Graves (eds.), *Women and Socialism – Socialism and Women: Europe between the World Wars*, p. 280, 283.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 323.

<sup>42</sup> Gleb J. Albert, "'Esteemed Comintern!': The Communist International and World Revolutionary Charisma in Early Soviet Society', *Twentieth Century Communism*, No. 8 (2015), p. 11.

Third, Duchêne's 'independent temperament' did not suit her to the 'restrictions of an authoritarian party'.<sup>43</sup> Despite her support for communist ideals, her independence from political constraints would not be sacrificed; she asserted that

'if at the moment, some doctrines satisfy better than others the spirit of progress, it could be allowed... to attach oneself to these doctrines, to make propaganda in their favour, but it is necessary that the faculty to judge, the independence of spirit, the freedom to evolve, is always safeguarded.'<sup>44</sup>

She later argued that it had in fact been her duty to report on the positive aspects of the Soviet Union:

'Those who had seen... the Soviet realities and the immense prospects for progress, had the duty, on their return to their country, to unmask the deliberate lies spread about the USSR, to undeceive those who had accepted them, to enlighten the ignorant.'<sup>45</sup>

Duchêne's apparent political neutrality was important precisely because she held leading roles in several bourgeois organisations. WILPF, despite its avowed neutrality, was consistently accused of being a communist auxiliary throughout the interwar period, because of how its members conducted themselves. Duchêne often tried to separate her personal politics from her WILPF work, arguing that 'even if I did belong to the Communist Party, it should not be a reason to consider our League an indentured organisation to this party.'<sup>46</sup> She also pointed out the gulf between WILPF and communist groups, highlighting the 'absolute impossibility of an organisation as bourgeois as ours ever being admitted into the Communist International.'<sup>47</sup> It is also important to note that Duchêne's central position of influence over bourgeois pacifist women could be used by her communist comrades to legitimise Popular Front strategies amongst women from the mid-1930s onwards. Developing concrete links with bourgeois organisations while cultivating relationships with international

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<sup>43</sup> Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 192.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

<sup>45</sup> Gabrielle Duchêne, 'Des intellectuels français viennent à l'U.R.S.S.', *Études soviétiques*, No. 31 (1950), pp. 42-43.

<sup>46</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', p. 305.

communists provided new avenues for her work, particularly her anti-fascist activism. The fact that Duchêne was a prominent bourgeois activist positively affected the CMF's ability to attract non-political members, because she appeared to represent a less politically radical section of the committee.

### **Anti-Fascism**

The seizure of power by the Nazis presented a threat to the rights of women, not only in Germany, but across Europe more broadly. Duchêne was 'clearsighted from the beginning' about the threat posed by German fascism to women specifically, evoking 'mature peace *realpolitik*' by recognising the need to actively fight fascist dictatorships.<sup>48</sup> Duchêne believed that the capitalist 'crusade' against Soviet communism had led to 'the introduction and development of fascism', particularly anti-Soviet campaigns which created an atmosphere which allowed fascism to flourish.<sup>49</sup> Like many on the left, Duchêne saw fascism as the last gasp of the dying capitalist system; she argued that capitalism would 'not abdicate power... it will defend itself to the end... and resort to the worst means to prolong its existence.'<sup>50</sup> These statements attracted criticism from more conservative sections of WILPF; the British section labelled her a 'premature anti-fascist', and Duchêne in return bemoaned the British section's 'obstructionist policies' towards anti-fascist activities.<sup>51</sup>

Duchêne first became involved in anti-fascist activism in 1932 with the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War, during which she read Romain Rolland's 'Declaration to the World Congress' in his absence. In front of 2,200

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<sup>48</sup> Sandi Cooper, 'Pacifism, Feminism and Fascism in Interwar France', *The International History Review*, Vol. 19 No. 1 (1997), p. 113.

<sup>49</sup> Gabrielle Duchêne, 'World Peace and the Campaign against Russia', *Pax International*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (1930), p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Gabrielle Duchêne, 'Formulation du But de la Section Française' (February 1934), Duchêne Archives, F<sup>A</sup> res. 208/15, La Contemporaine (LC).

<sup>51</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 133.

delegates, Duchêne evoked Rolland's belief that this anti-war demonstration should eschew party politics, which she would adopt for the CMF: 'to deploy the great flag of the united front: Above all parties!'<sup>52</sup> However, the first plans for a women's anti-fascist congress came from Duchêne and WILPF, who made enquiries about convening an anti-fascist congress of women's organisations for November 1933. Many women's organisations declined to attend because they did not want to support a meeting which was 'definitely directed against one political system'. Despite a 'need for concerted action amongst women to defend their hard-won rights', and the fact that 'the personal sympathies of all... [were] opposed to [fascism]', maintaining the image of political neutrality was the main factor in declining.<sup>53</sup> This halted WILPF's attempts to convene a women's anti-fascist meeting, so Gabrielle Duchêne and an 'ad hoc committee of which the nucleus was to be elected among Paris women', including Bernadette Cattaneo, decided to organise their own meeting, based on individual participation.

Charlotte Haldane opposed Nazism primarily because of her religious background: her father was a German Jew, and she had been aware of the injustices of anti-Semitism since her youth. However, her feminist ideology also influenced her feelings towards fascism; Hurlley and Russel have argued that Haldane 'could not find sympathy for a movement which pursued white macho male bonding, defended 'creative nihilism' and denied women the power increasingly achieved in the West following the rise of the New Woman, independent and assertive'.<sup>54</sup> She despised the perpetuation of gender and race differences by fascist politicians, who emphasised a return to the traditional roles of women in the home. Further, Haldane found the Chamberlain government's 'fraternisation' with German and Italian fascists abhorrent and, spurred by the British government's policy of non-intervention in the Spanish

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<sup>52</sup> Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*, p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> To Mrs Forsythe from Miss A. Honora Enfield (2 November 1933), WILPF Microfilm Records, Reel 33: 0285.

<sup>54</sup> Hurlley and Russel, 'Women against Fascism: Nancy Cunard and Charlotte Haldane', p. 44.

Civil War, travelled to Paris to recruit members for the International Brigades, an assignment that will be discussed in the next section.<sup>55</sup>

Interestingly, Maria Rabaté had participated in no substantive French anti-fascist activism before she was 'parachuted' into her role as secretary of the French section of the CMF. This was because, until December 1932 the Rabaté family still resided in Spain, continuing Octave's Profintern work in the country. Further, on their return, they were sent by the PCF to Bordeaux, far from the Parisian centre of anti-fascist activism, where Octave became the secretary of the CGTU for the region stretching from Gironde to Gers, in South West France. Maria was commissioned by the PCF to work amongst women in the area, and it was here that she pursued her apprenticeship in oration, by agitating amongst the workers at the factories in Bordeaux and Bègles.<sup>56</sup> It was only in February 1935 that the family permanently moved to Paris at the request of Henri Barbusse, putting them in the European anti-fascist capital of the period. Octave had been summoned to work in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, while Maria was made the president of the French section of the CMF by PCF leader Jacques Duclos.<sup>57</sup> Until 1934, Maria Rabaté was primarily concerned with trade union work amongst women; while the rise of fascism was undoubtedly a concern for her, her role, as prescribed by the party, demanded that she focus on domestic labour issues until preparations for a women's anti-fascist movement had been made.

## **National and International Connections**

Each of the CMF leaders held impressive contacts useful for the development and spread of their committee. Before discussing this mass of connections, it is necessary

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Rabaté, *Octave et Maria : Du Komintern à la Résistance*, p. 75 and 80.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

to understand the nature of the relationships between the four women examined in this chapter. For the most part, there is little evidence of any contact between most of the women prior to the decision to plan a women's anti-fascist congress in 1934. Certainly, it is clear that Maria Rabaté and Charlotte Haldane were isolated from Duchêne and Cattaneo in Paris; Haldane, based in London, had not collaborated on any form of activism with her French counterparts before 1934 at the earliest. Rabaté had little contact with Duchêne in the period before 1934, mainly because she was resident in different European countries and then, on her return to France, stationed in a region far from the Parisian centre. However, by the end of the 1920s, Cattaneo was heading the *commission féminine* of the PCF with Rabaté and other 'motivated and efficient militants', including Cilly Vassart (the wife of PCF Secretary Albert Vassart).<sup>58</sup> Rabaté likely interacted with Cattaneo during CGTU and PCF conferences, although in the course of their daily work, would not have interacted, each being responsible for regions at opposite ends of France. Similarly, Duchêne and Cattaneo crossed paths on occasion. Duchêne's labour activism put her into contact with the CGTU that Cattaneo represented, even participating in a CGTU visit to the USSR for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations for the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927. Both women were based in Paris and worked in labour activism, and, as mentioned earlier, Cattaneo was on the list of Parisian women that Gabrielle Duchêne compiled to help convene an anti-fascist congress, demonstrating that the women knew of each other's work.

Each of the leaders of the CMF was well-connected in the communist and activist spheres. Cattaneo, as the cadre responsible for the woman question in the PCF, was particularly close to women's activists across Europe. According to Cattaneo, it was she who obtained the participation of the Belgian socialist women, headed by Isabelle Blume, in the CMF. Blume has been praised for understanding

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<sup>58</sup> Pudal and Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 173 and 167.



the rise of fascism and for 'helping her victims and alerting politicians about the risks' for democracy.<sup>59</sup> She would eventually be expelled from the *Parti ouvrier belge* (POB) in 1951 for her involvement with the Soviet-controlled World Peace Council, joining the *Parti communiste de Belgique* (PCB) in 1961.<sup>60</sup> Blume respected her communist colleagues in the CMF, allowing a collaboration which resulted in a strong Belgian anti-fascist movement. Belgian socialists were a key part of the CMF, as the PCB women felt a lack of support from their party in the movement. They asked the Party to raise 'the question of the significance, methods, and forms of work of the international women's anti-fascist movement' in the broader PCB and emphasised the need to 'organise the preparation of cadres for the anti-fascist women's movement' to help strengthen communist influence in the committee.<sup>61</sup> Cattaneo also visited Belgium on numerous occasions to aid the development of the national section there, collaborating with women of all parties.

Cattaneo was also visited Spain and was involved with Spanish communist women. On one visit, with Isabelle Blume and other socialist women, the delegates broadcast an appeal for action on Radio Madrid; they argued that 'the time for words has passed [and] the time for actions has arrived' to protect Spain, 'the living and bleeding parapet against fascism'.<sup>62</sup> Cattaneo also attended congresses in Barcelona and Valencia in 1938 and held meetings on her return to influence public opinion on the 'desperate situation of a Spain strangled by non-intervention'.<sup>63</sup> Cattaneo went to

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<sup>59</sup> Suzanne van Rokeghem et al., *Des femmes dans l'histoire en Belgique, depuis 1830* (Brussels : Éditions Luc Pire, 2006), p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> Eliane Gubin et al. (eds.), *Dictionnaire des femmes belges : XIXe et XXe siècles* (Brussels : Éditions Racine, 2006), p. 292.

<sup>61</sup> 'Information on the Work of the National Women's Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Commissions: Belgium' (13.03.1937), Pandor, 543\_2\_21, Doc. 84, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Pudal and Pannetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 175; Laurence Brown, 'The Great Betrayal? European Socialists and Humanitarian Relief during the Spanish Civil War', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 67, No.1 (2002), p. 83.

<sup>63</sup> Willard, 'Témoignage : Maria Rabaté, une femme communiste', p. 180.

Spain four times in total during the Civil War, with her final visit in 1938 intended to counter 'Trotskyist intrigues amongst women'.<sup>64</sup>

In addition, Cattaneo visited the socialist deputy Margarita Nelken who had asked for her assistance at a socialist meeting at which Nelken was a speaker. Cattaneo used her experience at this meeting to demonstrate how integral it was to work with all parties on the Republican side. In an article for *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, she acknowledged that a close relationship between socialists and communists was unique to Spain and necessary for the Republics' survival; Cattaneo saw that 'fraternity is great in Spain between sincere combatants of the same cause and that it greatly facilitates the common task - the fight against the main enemy: fascism'.<sup>65</sup>

However, Cattaneo worked particularly closely with the Spanish communist politician Dolores Ibárruri while she was in Spain. Ibárruri (also known by the moniker 'La Pasionaria') had been actively involved in communist politics from 1920.<sup>66</sup> Ernest Hemingway immortalised her in his Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, when an *Izvestia* reporter said that 'in her voice you could tell the truth of what she said... goodness and truth shine from her as from a true saint of the people. Not for nothing is she called La Pasionaria'.<sup>67</sup> Cattaneo herself wrote that Ibárruri was 'the soul' of the Republican cause and 'a sublime heroine. In front of her, even enemies are obliged to bow.'<sup>68</sup> Ibárruri had been involved with anti-fascist activism in Spain from the early 1930s and had organised over 100,000 women into anti-fascist

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<sup>64</sup> Pudal and Pannetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 175.

<sup>65</sup> Bernadette Cattaneo, 'En Espagne avec le Front Populaire', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (July 1936), p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> For biographies of Dolores Ibárruri, see Rafael Cruz, *Pasionaria: Dolores Ibarruri, Historia y Simbolo* (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, 1999); Robert Low, *La Pasionaria: The Spanish Firebrand* (London: Hutchinson, 1993); Paul Preston, 'Pasionaria of Steel: Dolores Ibárruri', *Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 321 – 334.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), p. 372.

<sup>68</sup> Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Pasionaria, l'âme de l'Espagne', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (September 1936), p.7.

committees across Spain. Despite Ibárruri's work with women, Lisa Lines has characterised her feminism as 'routine, limited [and] subordinated to larger aims', preferring to focus instead on the war and international communism.<sup>69</sup> Ibárruri's goals were similar to those of Bernadette Cattaneo, who, while certainly being concerned about women's place in society, focused more on questions of economic parity and anti-fascist activism.

Nevertheless, Ibárruri still had 'a powerful effect on Spanish women' in her role as the 'most prominent' Spanish communist leader of the period. The fact that she was so visible in Spanish politics made her an icon for ordinary Spanish women; she was described as 'strong, confident and dominant', deciding party policy, making visits to the front to keep morale high, and serving as a deputy in the Republican parliament throughout the conflict.<sup>70</sup> In Paul Preston's view, she 'encouraged women to abandon the serene servility that was considered the proper attitude of womankind', and inspired some women to become *milicianas*.<sup>71</sup> Ibárruri became a 'legendary figure' of far-left politics, and was the focus of 'hero worship almost on a par with... adulation of Stalin himself'.<sup>72</sup>

Cattaneo travelled with Ibárruri across war-torn Spain numerous times. They visited the headquarters of the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE) including Ibárruri's personal office and the offices of the women's section. In addition, they visited a '*Pro Infancia*' children's home where orphans and the children of anti-fascist fighters resided, and a women's prison in which the wives and relatives of fascist generals and some former aristocrats who had sided with Franco were imprisoned, including the Comtesse of Salvatierra and the Duchess of Victoria.<sup>73</sup> After the fascist

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<sup>69</sup> Lisa Lines, *Milicianas: Women in Combat in the Spanish Civil War* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> Preston, *Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War*, p. 277.

<sup>72</sup> Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920-1939* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 267.

<sup>73</sup> Cattaneo, 'Pasionaria, l'âme de l'Espagne', p.7.

triumph in Spain in March 1939, Ibárruri was exiled to the Soviet Union, where she worked for the Comintern until its dissolution in 1943. She remained in the Soviet Union until 1977, when she returned to Spain following Franco's death and became a member of parliament for the Asturias.

Cattaneo was also a frequent guest of the Soviet government in Moscow, maintaining relationships with high level Bolshevik cadres.<sup>74</sup> In fact, according to Cattaneo, Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Comintern, approached her in 1934 about launching a congress of women against war.<sup>75</sup> Cattaneo's role in the women's section of the Comintern also provided her with the opportunity to interact with other prominent communist internationalists: for example, she hosted the Czech communist leader Bohumir Šmeral and the Italian Palmiro Togliatti at her home in Paris. In addition, she had a close relationship with Elena Stasova, the head of International Red Aid (MOPR), which will be explored further in chapter four.

On the other hand, Duchêne's most important connections were with the feminist pacifist activist in WILPF. However, Duchêne was a controversial individual and was often accused of harbouring communist sympathies; for example, the International Executive Committee of WILPF received correspondence from Elisabeth Waern-Bugge of the Swedish section, who accused Duchêne of being a member of the communist party because of her links to the CMF. However, WILPF's international secretary, Emily Greene Balch chastised Waern-Bugge for her accusation, saying:

'What we as chairman and honorary secretary of the W.I.L. cannot admit is your allusion to Madame Duchêne pretending not to be a communist. If Madame Duchêne says that she is not a member of the communist party, she is absolutely to be believed... She has never made a secret of her sympathy with Soviet Russia, and if she is more lenient to the faults that are

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<sup>74</sup> Cattaneo's relationship with Stasova will be further discussed in chapter four.

<sup>75</sup> Pudal and Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 167.

certainly committed there, it is because she suffers more intensely under the faults that the political and economic regime under which we are living commits.<sup>76</sup>

Greene Balch further explained that she wanted to defend 'Madame Duchêne's sincere, continuous, and self-sacrificing work for peace', but that she did not think it 'the case that the League allows her to be its dictator', as Waern-Bugge had insinuated.<sup>77</sup> Duchêne complained to Gertrud Baer that

'whether our dear international feminist tyrants like it or not, unity is making progress and 'with them or without them, or even against them', as the classical phrase has it. Unity among women will come about, it is to be hoped, if not among the leaders, then at least in the ranks'.<sup>78</sup>

In addition, Duchêne insisted that French members of WILPF must not 'display open hostility' to the CMF, but this stimulated fear that the League was increasingly coming under political influence and was thus 'in danger of losing its own voice'.<sup>79</sup> Certain local sections began to openly question Duchêne's leadership as a result. Norman Ingram has claimed that it was in this period that Duchêne developed 'a very rigid idea of what constituted proper action for peace, and her attitude to the French section gradually became one of rule by fiat'.<sup>80</sup> In particular, she clashed often with the Lyon section over her role in the CMF. The Lyon group was one of the largest in France, with around 300 members out of a total of 1400 across France. On 18 March 1936, Duchêne received a letter from the Lyon section which accused her of using her role as president to quash dissent and asserted its independence from the larger French section of WILPF: 'Your tone suffocates everyone... Your attitude both outrages and saddens us. We are a large enough group to direct ourselves'.<sup>81</sup> On 10 June 1936, Duchêne officially excluded all members who sympathised with the arguments of the Lyon group from the French national section, justifying her actions

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<sup>76</sup> To Elisabeth Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch (30 October 1934) WILPF Microfilm, Reel 2:1696.

<sup>77</sup> To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch (12 December 1934), WILPF Microfilm, Reel 2:1699.

<sup>78</sup> Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', p. 309.

<sup>79</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 133.

<sup>80</sup> Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939*, p. 283.

<sup>81</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 134.

by publicly accusing them of undermining WILPF's credibility in France. She was supported in her decision by the two international vice-Presidents of the League, Clara Ragaz and Gertrud Baer; Baer wrote to Duchêne that she was 'very interested to find out that you can now expel the 'phenomena' of Lyon and others. It is really necessary, and you will see that you will benefit from this decision'.<sup>82</sup> By the outbreak of war in 1939, more than two-fifths of French WILPF members had resigned in protest at Duchêne's authoritarianism, leaving the small French national section much weaker.<sup>83</sup>

Lorraine Coons has emphasised how contradictory Duchêne's leadership was; she 'continually called for openness and discussion in the [international] WILPF' but 'in her own national section, become intolerant of any dissent within the rank and file'.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Norman Ingram has argued that because of Duchêne's 'Stalinisation', the French section lost its 'inherently new, exciting, innovative and unique... feminist contribution to peace' by the end of the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Further, Emily Greene Balch later recalled that Duchêne

'had asked her directly whether she thought the Ligue would be better without the French Section... [Balch] replied that she had arrived, with great pain, at the conclusion that G. Duchêne was hampered in her work [with the CMF] by her connection with the WILPF, and that the WILPF found its work made difficult by G. Duchêne'.<sup>86</sup>

However, despite these controversies, Duchêne continued to hold the presidency of both the CMF and the French section of WILPF, and she maintained control of WILPF until her death in 1954.

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<sup>82</sup> Letter from Gertrud Baer to Gabrielle Duchêne (15 June 1936), Duchêne Archives, GF<sup>A</sup> res 208/17, LC.

<sup>83</sup> Coons, 'Gabrielle Duchêne: Feminist, Pacifist, Reluctant Bourgeoisie', p. 135.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

<sup>85</sup> Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939*, p. 251.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 297.

Charlotte Haldane was a frequent traveller during the interwar period, and made a multitude of connections across the globe in the course of her journalism and communist activism. She and J.B.S Haldane often visited the Soviet Union, where she worked closely with agents of the Comintern. However, Haldane's most important assignment was her work in China during the Second Sino-Japanese war. According to Haldane, she initially met with Chinese representatives at the CMF's Marseille congress in 1938, after she had made a speech 'about the heroism and stoicism of the women of Spain'. Haldane claimed that she was approached by a Chinese delegate who personally asked her to investigate the impact of the war in China:

"If you would only do for the women of China what you have done for the women of Spain. If you would only help us, too.' I answered that I would be happy to do anything in my power to help them. 'Would you be willing to come to China?' she asked. 'Certainly', I replied, 'if I were invited.'<sup>87</sup>

Whether the exchange between Haldane and a Chinese delegate occurred is unknown; Chinese delegates attended the Marseille congress in 1938, making such a conversation possible, and one, Loh Tsie, gave a talk on the trauma faced by Chinese women under Japanese aggression, which, she said, would 'surpass the imagination of civilised people'.<sup>88</sup> Regardless, Haldane was approached by the CPGB to undertake a mission to China, and she was charged by the British Labour leader Clement Atlee and the Liberal leader Sir Archibald Sinclair to carry messages to Chiang Kai-Shek on their behalf. Further, she also met with many prominent Chinese communists, Madame Sun-Yat Sen, and the leaders of the Kuomintang, Chiang-Kai Shek's party who had a tenuous 'alliance' with the communists against the Japanese invasion.<sup>89</sup>

Haldane also visited Spain on numerous occasions during the Civil War, utilising her language skills to act as an interpreter for various important guests during

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<sup>87</sup> Haldane, *Truth Will Out*, p. 143 – 144.

<sup>88</sup> 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX ! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938', p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Haldane's visit will be explored in further detail in chapter five.

her visits. For example, in 1938 she travelled to Spain as an interpreter for the American singer and actor Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda. During this visit, Robeson sang for International Brigade volunteers, visited various towns and cities close to the fighting, and met with communist activists, leading the Press in the USA to question his political allegiances. These meetings were very often facilitated by Charlotte Haldane through her own contacts; she set up meetings between Robeson and Robert Minor and Earl Browder, both leaders of the CPUSA, and William Rust, the editor of the British *Daily Worker* newspaper.<sup>90</sup> She also witnessed the effects of the bombing of Madrid with Eslanda Robeson, which brought home for both of them the 'sordid wickedness of modern aerial warfare on defenceless civilians'.<sup>91</sup>

Haldane was also instructed by the CPGB to go to Paris in March 1937 to meet groups of recruits for the International Brigades, spending three months in the city responsible for the British Battalion. She took great pride in her political work there, despite the conflicts that her bourgeois background often caused between her and other party cadres. She turned up in Paris in a 'fur coat', which was considered inappropriate by her French contact, and lipstick, which was described as 'a disgusting bourgeois habit'.<sup>92</sup> However, Haldane was impressed by her interactions with the women of the PCF, comparing them favourably to her British comrades; she stated that the French communist women were 'charming, intelligent, well-dressed and obviously had a lot of money to spend'. She was particularly envious of their 'expensive and professionally produced women's paper', which was more subtle than its British equivalent.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Burnie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), p. 382.

<sup>91</sup> Adamson, *Charlotte Haldane: Woman Writer in a Man's World*, p. 120.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.



Maria Rabaté, on the other hand, seemingly had fewer contacts in the activist circles she frequented than the other three women. This is perhaps because Rabaté was engaged in underground activist work before her return to France at the end of 1932, facilitating the entrance of communists into Spain. This was brief work, only occasionally lasting long enough for Rabaté to form useful contacts. One such example is the work that she undertook for Ramón Casanellas and his partner, Maroussia Fortuss (also known as Maria Fortus). Casanellas was a Spanish communist and one of the assassins of Eduardo Dato, the president of the Spanish Council of Ministers, in 1921, after which he escaped to the USSR. Fortuss, on the other hand, was a Ukrainian woman who Casanellas first met in Moscow in 1919, who would become an NKVD agent in Spain during the Civil War, under the identity of the Uruguayan Julia Jiménez Cárdenas.<sup>94</sup>

The two most important missions that Maria Rabaté undertook in Spain were for Casanellas and Fortuss; Casanellas had returned to Spain in 1931 to reorganise the PCE and stand as the party's electoral candidate in Barcelona, and Rabaté was charged with securing Fortuss on her arrival and delivering her safely to Casanellas.<sup>95</sup> No-one was sure of the time or place of Fortuss' arrival, with the only useful information being 'soon, on the Ramblas'. Rabaté spotted Fortuss on the third day of waiting, and quickly sowed confusion in any possible followers by getting into a taxi with Fortuss, only to immediately leave through the opposite door and enter a second vehicle, which sped away quickly.<sup>96</sup> The other mission that Rabaté was charged with involved delivering Casanellas to a Comintern contact. Casanellas arrived at the Rabaté lodgings in June 1932 carrying a white cane in hand and wearing 'black glasses fitting his nose', posing as a blind man to avoid detection by the police.

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<sup>94</sup> Boris Volodarsky, *Stalin's Agent: The Life and Death of Alexander Orlov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 606 – 607.

<sup>95</sup> Victor Alba and Stephen Schwartz, *Spanish Marxism Versus Soviet Communism: A History of the P.O.U.M. in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2008), p. 43.

<sup>96</sup> Rabaté, *Octave et Maria: Du Komintern à la Résistance*, p. 60.

Rabaté's job was to procure a taxi from the Viaducto de Vallcarca and accompany Casanellas to the flat of a German Comintern delegate, only known as Phillipe, where Rabaté left him, 'mission accomplished'.<sup>97</sup>

It is also important to briefly note that Rabaté also held some contacts in the PCF through her work amongst women in France in the 1920s. In fact, Rabaté even claimed that it was her relationship with PCF politician Jacques Duclos which led to her promotion to secretary of the French section of the CMF. Duclos and Octave Rabaté had also worked together in Spain for two years from December 1930 on strengthening the PCE and strictly enforcing the Comintern's 'class against class' policy, further reinforcing the connections between the Rabaté family and Jacques Duclos.<sup>98</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The CMF and its work were defined by the women who ran it; despite the Comintern's role in founding and funding the group, it was the leaders who shaped the policies of the organisation and who decided the ideologies it was shaped by. These women had all been influenced in their politics and ideologies by the political issues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Dreyfus affair, which provided the base on which their anti-fascist activism in the 1930s was built. Beyond this, the promises of equality of class and gender made during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 appealed to Haldane, Cattaneo and Rabaté to the extent that they joined the communist parties in their countries, while Duchêne worked closely with communists in many aspects of her activism. The Comintern did play a role in engaging Cattaneo and Rabaté in the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>98</sup> Victor Alba, *The Communist Party in Spain* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1983), p. 107.

movement however, as both have recalled how they were charged by the Comintern with the preparation of a world congress of women against fascism.

The organisation of the CMF was a collaborative effort, which is perhaps the most important aspect of the CMF hierarchy. On a basic level, Duchêne and Cattaneo acted as president and secretary of the international committee, while Rabaté and Haldane represented their respective national sections. However, each woman played an integral role in the group and in the coordination of women's anti-fascist activism. The feminist pacifist Andrée Jouve labelled the CMF as the 'precursor of the united action' of the Popular Front, highlighting Duchêne's 'incessant work' and 'series of intelligent and opportune initiatives' for the committee's success.<sup>99</sup> Rabaté praised Duchêne and Cattaneo for their roles in the CMF: for her, Duchêne was 'a profoundly honest, sincere woman' who was 'pro-Soviet' and 'devoted all her time to the pacifist and anti-fascist movement', making her the perfect candidate for president of the committee. Cattaneo, on the other hand, was 'a good journalist, speaker, agitator. And... she enjoyed the full confidence of the Communist Party and of the Comintern'.<sup>100</sup> Cattaneo's work in the CMF reflected these characteristics; she was the editor of the French section of the CMF's journal, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, she helped to orchestrate aid campaigns for victims of fascism and imperialism in Spain, Germany, and China, and she served as a liaison between the CMF and the Comintern. Cattaneo was closely involved in the everyday running of the organisation, while Duchêne was more of a figurehead for the organisation, as she often took the lead at CMF congresses, giving well-researched speeches on contemporary events. As president, she represented the CMF publicly, and thus linked it to her other endeavours, including WILPF, giving the committee a level of legitimacy and confirming the idea that the CMF was open to all women 'regardless of party'. That

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<sup>99</sup> Andrée Jouve, 'Nos tâches dans le Front Populaire' (28 June 1936), Duchêne Archives, GF<sup>A</sup> res 92, LC.

<sup>100</sup> Willard, 'Témoignage : Maria Rabaté, une femme communiste', p.180.

is not to say that she did not participate in the types of work Cattanéó was doing and that Cattanéó was not making speeches on behalf of the group. In addition, Haldane and Rabaté were intimately involved with the journals of their respective national sections and were integral for maintaining links with women across Britain and France respectively.

However, the most crucial things that the leaders of the CMF brought to the organisation were their contacts and connections across the activist sphere in the interwar period; they were all closely connected to representatives of the communist, feminist and pacifist movements and utilised these contacts during the course of their work in the CMF. Despite not being engaged in any extensive work with one another in the period before the CMF was founded, Duchêne, Cattanéó, Rabaté and Haldane were commissioned by the Comintern to work together to coordinate their anti-fascist activism. However, it was their external connections which enriched the CMF's work the most. Cattanéó's links with communist and socialist women alike legitimised the CMF as a Popular Front movement, while her relationship with communist leaders across Europe, including Dolores Ibárruri, Elena Stasova, and Georgi Dimitrov gave the CMF a sense of importance. Duchêne's feminist and pacifist connections also provided the committee with legitimacy from another avenue, allowing the CMF to present itself as a movement that was not entirely controlled by communists. However, her comrades in WILPF were not always accepting of her anti-fascist activism, with women in both the French and the international body raising concerns about her work with known communists. Rabaté was involved with clandestine work in Moscow and Spain before her return to France and role in the CMF, while Haldane's journalistic and academic connections allowed her to conduct CMF business in person as far away as China.

These activists shared the responsibilities of the CMF, working together to build an organisation against fascism at the behest of the Comintern, with the explicit

goal of attracting women of all parties to struggle against the fascist threat. Cattané, Rabaté and Haldane had more freedom to hold an active role in the CMF than Duchêne, who already held leadership roles in other international organisations, and could not commit herself to CMF work in the same way. The divergent careers of each woman in activism and politics provided them with the tools to effectively create an organisation which allowed women to implement solutions against the fascist menace, which had a not insignificant membership in France at least. They worked in tandem under the guidance of the Comintern, to create a women's anti-fascist organisation that embraced Popular Front ideals, while also encouraging non-political women to consider the benefits of supporting communism

This chapter will end with a brief examination of the trajectory of the leaders of the CMF after its dissolution. Bernadette Cattané resigned from the PCF and renounced her party work amongst women in October 1939, citing the Nazi-Soviet pact for her decision. Cattané explained her decision in *Le Populaire*:

‘It is impossible for me... to understand a policy which extends a hand to the aggressor and makes ‘friendship pacts’ with Hitler. I cannot accept that Hitler has been presented to us as a champion of order in Europe, while he has continued to be a constant threat to everyone. I cannot, therefore, follow those who defend such a policy, and I remain convinced that we will not truly have peace until we have destroyed fascism.’<sup>101</sup>

She left Paris, moving to Moissac in the South of France with her husband where she helped Jewish children of the *Centre des éclaireurs israélites*, a Jewish scouting organisation, during the war. Bernadette and her husband returned to Paris after the war but following his death in 1953 Bernadette moved to La Penne-sur-Huveaune near Marseille, where she stayed until her own death in 1963. After Cattané's break with the PCF in 1939, she rejected activism of any sort, spending her final living a comparatively quiet life to the one she had led during the interwar period.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> ‘Bernadette Cattané se désolidarise des Staliniens’, *Le Populaire* (6 October 1939), p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> Pudal and Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, pp. 167 – 169.

Gabrielle Duchêne also left Paris after the outbreak of the Second World War, but immediately lost track of her family in the 'mass exodus' of people fleeing the German advance. Duchêne's anti-fascist activities had made her a potential target for arrest, to the extent that she may have been 'wanted by the Gestapo'.<sup>103</sup> Her family returned to Paris during the war, while Gabrielle stayed in the South of France, residing in Tarn and Aix-en-Provence primarily. She returned to Paris in 1945, where her husband died in 1947 from an 'accident that had occurred during the war'.<sup>104</sup> Duchêne remained engaged in activism until her death in August 1954 at the age of 84, at which time she still held the role of President of the French section of WILPF.

Charlotte Haldane spent much of the war as a journalist, visiting the Soviet Union and publishing a positive account of this time in the travel diary *Russian Newsreel*. However, this trip shattered the idealised image of the Soviet state that she had; she recalled that when she realised that the Soviet Union had hidden the devastating effect of the Blitz on British citizens from its people, it 'brought home to me, speedily, and sharply, the effects of their censorship'. She also saw the poverty of the Soviet peasantry for the first time when she witnessed two hundred peasants carrying 'primitive agricultural implements' and a 'hunk of bread'. This image of poverty was contrary to what was 'transmitted abroad by VOKS for foreign propaganda purposes', and she recounted that the scene she had 'just witnessed... seemed to mock my facile and naïve optimism, my wishful dreaming, and to accuse me of bearing false witness to my own people'. Haldane knew, even before her return to London, that she would 'cast off [the] physical burden' and end her relationship with the CPGB. When she related her desire to leave the party on her return from the USSR to her husband J.B.S. Haldane, they split 'without acrimony' due to his

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<sup>103</sup> Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : Entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 430.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 431.

'disbelief and opposition' to her experiences in the Soviet Union.<sup>105</sup> She died in 1969, twenty years after the publication of her anti-Soviet memoir, *Truth Will Out*.

Maria Rabaté's post-CMF career was perhaps the most eventful of the four. The Rabaté family were on holiday in Isere when they heard the news of the Nazi-Soviet pact. They were confused by the events, but inherently trusted the Soviet Union and its actions. Octave was soon mobilised by the French government, and Maria began to ensure links between communists who had been forced underground and organised the defence of those communists who had been imprisoned. Maria was approached by the leaders of the PCF in exile and asked to go to Angoulême, where she would continue to re-establish links between local communist activists. Octave was eventually arrested by the Nazis and sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, after which Maria left her children with her mother and worked clandestinely in Paris.<sup>106</sup> Until the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Maria worked as a member of the Resistance, responsible for co-ordinating the movement in several départements in Northern France: Seine-Maritime, Eure, Eure-et-Loire, Calvados, Manche, and Oise-et-Somme. She was charged with mobilising women against the Germans by organising petitions on issues of food, heating, wages and working conditions and by training women to help resistance fighters and make identity papers. By May 1943, Rabaté was joint-head of the women's committees for the entire Northern Zone with Claudine Chomat.<sup>107</sup>

After the war, Rabaté sat on the Parisian Committee of National Liberation and became a candidate for the fourteenth arrondissement to the Provisional Municipal Assembly. This was just the beginning of her governmental career, after which she sat on the Paris City Council and became the vice-president of the Seine

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<sup>105</sup> Haldane, *Truth Will Out*, p. 213, 219, 239, and 259.

<sup>106</sup> Paula Schwartz, 'Redefining Resistance: Women's Activism in Wartime France', in Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>107</sup> Rabaté, *Octave et Maria: Du Komintern à la Résistance*, pp. 108-109.

General Council. In 1947, she was elected as a communist deputy to the National Assembly for the Seine region and was re-elected to government in 1951 and 1956, after which she was defeated by the Gaullist candidate.<sup>108</sup> She served on committees which considered issues surrounding the family, population, public health, reconstruction and war damage, and justice, and was involved 'passionately' with the issue of adoptions, successfully lobbying for a bill to relax the conditions for adoption which left so many children without a family after the war.<sup>109</sup> She was well-known for remaining close to the people in her constituency, and was labelled as 'a bitter Pasionaria from the Place Maubert, Montrouge and other places in the Paris Rive-Gauche' by the far-right politician Jacques Isorni.<sup>110</sup> Rabaté retired from politics after 1958, and died on February 9, 1985 aged 85 years.

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<sup>108</sup> 'Maria Rabaté', Last modified November 2019 [[http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/\(num\\_dept\)/6565](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/(num_dept)/6565)], Accessed 12.11.2019.

<sup>109</sup> Rabaté, *Octave et Maria: Du Komintern à la Résistance*, p. 110.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.



### Chapter Three

#### The Congresses of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*

International congresses were one of the most valuable tools in the CMF's anti-fascist arsenal. Christian Topalov has labelled international congresses as a 'machine for creating consensus', while Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahoney have argued that conferences are 'key sites of knowledge production... [which] provide opportunities for the performance of power and protest' and contribute to the 'global mobility of knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> Conferences during the interwar period allowed women 'with no previous experience on the international stage' to 'meet and work with like-minded colleagues' at periodic intervals which, despite being international affairs, had a 'national flavour'.<sup>2</sup> While international women's congresses could be 'by turns ponderous, conflict ridden, and celebratory', they also propagandised 'the cause of suffrage, peace, and internationalism', serving as 'inspiration for workers'.<sup>3</sup>

The CMF's short lifespan, beginning in 1934 and ending in the early years of the Second World War, meant that only two full-fledged international congresses were held. A third was planned for 1939 but was cancelled due to beginning of the Second World War. These congresses, in Paris in 1934 and Marseille in 1938, in conjunction with the planned congress for Cuba in 1939, were crucial for demonstrating the practical dynamics that existed between national sections of the CMF. In addition, they help us to understand the shifting priorities of the committee which changed substantially throughout the latter half of the 1930s in response to various events on both national and international levels.

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Lincoln Lambert, 'The Dynamics of Transnational Activism: The International Peace Congresses, 1843 – 51', *The International History Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2016), p. 127, and Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahoney, 'The Geographies of the Conference: Knowledge, Performance and Protest', *Geography Compass*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (2014), p. 414 and 426.

<sup>2</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171 and 172.

CMF congresses and their proceedings are indispensable for a study of the organisation for two reasons. First, they reflected the goals of the CMF, its leaders and the Comintern. For example, it was at the 1934 founding congress of the CMF that the slogans that would represent the committee made their debut: 'All women fraternally united against war and fascism', 'For the total emancipation of women', and 'Support the peace policy of the USSR, country of liberated women'.<sup>4</sup> The congresses established the course that the CMF would follow in its campaigns and how it would communicate with its members. Second, these congresses allowed national sections to collaborate in a way that they would not usually be able to in their daily work. They also provided the opportunity for working class women to interact with prominent female activists, like Gabrielle Duchêne, the British political activists Margaret Corbett-Ashby and Isabel Brown, the Soviet politician Elena Stasova, and the Belgian communist Marcelle Leroy.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to expose the ways that the CMF used transnational activism to create congresses in which communist, anti-fascist, and feminist ideologies intersected. The 'mechanisms of consensus-making' that Vanessa Lincoln Lambert has identified in the peace congresses held between 1843 and 1851 can also be used to analyse CMF congresses; this chapter will examine these 'mechanisms', which include the planning, organisation, and content of the meetings.<sup>6</sup> The first section will analyse CMF congress appeals to understand how the CMF tried to attract a variety of women to their meetings, and to see how changing CMF priorities were represented in these appeals. The second section will discuss the composition of delegates in terms of nationality, employment, and political background to determine if the CMF's claim that the organisation was 'above parties'

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<sup>4</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), Bernadette Cattaneo Archives, 1-BC-2(A), p. 4, Centre d'histoire sociale du XXème siècle (CHSVS).

<sup>5</sup> Marcelle Leroy will be discussed further in chapter three.

<sup>6</sup> Lincoln Lambert, 'The Dynamics of Transnational Activism: The International Peace Congresses, 1843 – 51', p. 127.

was representative of reality despite its obvious communist character. The third section will examine how communist influence affected the proceedings and decoration of the Paris congress in 1934 particularly. In the final section, the speeches given by delegates will be analysed, to understand how speakers comprehended and presented the significant issues faced by women in the period and how politics coloured their experiences and perceptions of these problems.

### **Congress Appeals**

The women who were tasked with arranging the first congress in 1934 were intentionally open in who their appeals targeted; they called for 'young and old, mothers, daughters, housewives [and] women workers in all trades and professions' to participate in a meeting which would demonstrate the strength of women's opposition to the economic and human costs of war.<sup>7</sup> For the later congresses the appeals were more focused on attracting women who were not actively involved in committee work but who were still concerned by fascist atrocities. For the 1938 congress, the CMF appealed to '*Femmes du monde entier*' and utilised the shocking events in China, Ethiopia, Spain, and Austria to target women who cared about these issues to encourage them to join the fight against fascism.<sup>8</sup>

Before the 1934 congress, 71 prominent British women were asked to sign a manifesto entitled 'To the Women of Britain', which was intended to encourage British women to make the journey to Paris for the meeting. The document asserted that 'the lot of women under fascism is particularly cruel... woman becomes the slave and plaything of man, to give pleasure and rest to the warrior... and to bring forth children for cannon fodder'.<sup>9</sup> It is unknown how many of the women approached by the

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<sup>7</sup> 'To the Women of Britain' (1934), Labour Party Archives, LP/ID/CI/17/1ii, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier !' (1938), Pandor, 543\_2\_26, Doc. 7; Chapter four covers the CMF's response to a number of these international events in further detail.

<sup>9</sup> 'To the Women of Britain' (1934), p. 2.

committee actually put their name to the document, but the variety of women who were asked to contribute is significant in itself. Many women from different social and political backgrounds were invited to sign this appeal: for example, the journalist Charlotte Haldane (who would later join the CPGB and assume leadership of the CMF in 1939 when it moved to London), the famous suffragette Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence, and the highly respected Anglo-Irish activist Charlotte Despard were all identified as women who the CMF wanted to approach to support their appeal.<sup>10</sup> As this was a draft manifesto, we cannot be sure who, if any, put their name to this particular appeal. However, it does demonstrate the variety of distinct categories of women the CMF wanted to represent its meeting: socialist, communist, co-operative and those with no political affiliation at all, novelists, politicians, activists, and society figures. The group's lofty ambitions for the congress were demonstrated by the famous women who were courted; the actress Madeleine Carroll, Virginia Woolf, Beatrix Potter, and theatre actress Flora Robson were all approached to put their name to the appeal to generate publicity in the British press for the congress.

However, Charlotte Despard, the British MP Ellen Wilkinson, and the peace activist Lilla Fenner Brockway did sign a French appeal created for the founding congress entitled '*pour la défense des femmes contre le fascisme*' along with members of the Comintern and WILPF women from across Europe.<sup>11</sup> In addition, a group of women, including the French novelist Claire Charles-Géniaux, the French journalist Andrée Viollis, the British novelist Carmel Haden-Guest and the Swedish academic Elin Wägner signed an appeal entitled '*Aux femmes de tous les pays!*' which decried the human cost of war and the expensive militarism of the intensifying arms race. The appeal used dramatic language to demonstrate to its readers how serious the threat to their lives from fascism was; it argued that the privileged in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*, p. 306.

society used 'fascist violence to further subjugate [women] and make us servants mobilised for their warlike purposes'.<sup>12</sup> The appeal covered three areas: the first section on 'War!', emphasised how war profiteers were already preparing 'with feverishness' for a new world conflict which would benefit them financially. It also warned its readers about the threat posed by ongoing conflicts perpetrated by capitalist and imperialist nations in China, Latin America, and Morocco.<sup>13</sup>

The second section, 'Misery!', highlighted the economic hardships facing women in this period; housewives were unable to balance the family budget, workers were forced into unemployment or had their wages reduced, and intellectual women, 'whose family life is sacrificed so she can get her diploma', were unable to find work. The third section, addressing 'Fascism!', informed readers of how fascist regimes were revoking rights that women had acquired following the First World War: 'Even her livelihood is removed; she is thrown back into slavery. Will we continue to leave fascism to accelerate its climb in the world and plunge people back into the worst barbarism?' The appeal posed the problems as ones that only women had the tools to fix; women from all backgrounds were encouraged to make the future committee a means of 'defence against war and an impassable obstacle to the fascist terror' and to 'steer [the group's] action towards the economic and political freedom of women'.<sup>14</sup> The appeals for the 1934 congress presented fascism and war as impacting women under dictatorial control only, and did not suggest that the women who were the target of the appeals were under any immediate threat. It asked women to contribute to the meeting for the sake of their sisters elsewhere who were struggling under this new type of political and societal oppression. This was not the case in the actual proceedings of the congress itself, but it is interesting that the appeals did not

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<sup>12</sup> 'Aux femmes de tous les pays !' (8 April 1934), Pandor, 543\_2\_2, Doc. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

emphasise the potential that fascism could spread to more capitalist European nations.

Women were asked to register for the congress primarily in terms of their employment; separate forms were provided for workers, teachers, government employees, agricultural workers, and housewives which allowed the CMF to categorise women by their employment status. Each questionnaire asked numerous questions, such as if the responder worked in a town or a village, how long they had worked, and if they were 'in contact with manual workers in [their] area'.<sup>15</sup> The understanding held by delegates about the situation faced by women under different styles of government was also evaluated. Delegates were asked what they thought of fascism, if they had 'information on the situation of women in fascist countries, and on the fascist ideology on the role of women', and if they knew about 'the situation of women in the USSR' with regards to the 'protection of children and maternity'.<sup>16</sup> Women were also asked questions related to their employment: for example, housewives were asked what the benefits were of staying at home and whether they thought women were more independent when they had their own salary or 'when she can only count on that of her companion'.<sup>17</sup> These questionnaires were likely sent to French delegates in particular as they were produced only in French. However, it was probable that some form of census on women's employment was sent to delegates from other countries, as statistics on employment exist for all attendees. Unfortunately, the responses received from these questionnaires are not contained in the archives; however, the statistical data they generated on women's employment were used in congress reports, which will be examined later in the chapter.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Enquête auprès des fonctionnaires', Pandor, 543\_2\_1, Doc. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> 'Enquête auprès des ménagères', Pandor, 543\_2\_1, Doc. 44.

The appeal for the congress in Marseille in 1938 was far more concerned with the worsening international situation than previous appeals.<sup>18</sup> With the conflicts occurring in China, Ethiopia, Austria and Spain, this congress appeal placed high importance on the subject of 'international morality'. The CMF argued that morality had been 'ridiculed everywhere' by the rise of fascism, particularly with regards to physical and ideological conflicts occurring in 1938. These conflicts effected the CMF directly, as the congress had been forced to move venues from the original host city of Prague following the Sudeten crisis and the annexation of Austria, after which 'it was decided to choose a French town, and the preference was on Marseille'.<sup>19</sup>

The Marseille appeal was concerned by the fact that fascist attempts to invade or influence other governments were becoming increasingly overt, and that Hitler was coming to realise 'step by step', the plans he had set out in *Mein Kampf*, the military invasion of Austria was 'an established fact, repression [had] begun, terror reigned'. It also argued that, if the massive consignments of German and Italian men and armaments continued without confrontation, Republican Spain, 'despite its heroism', would be defeated. This appeal utilised the now very real threat that fascism would spread and threaten the countries of some of the potential delegates. It emphasised that if democratic states did not quickly organise common defensive action, 'Czechoslovakia would be the Spain of tomorrow'. Women needed to formulate plans to pressure their governments into action and prevent the threat posed by the Nazis from spreading to Hungary, Belgium, Switzerland, and France. This fear was

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<sup>18</sup> For further on the international situation in 1938, see Harindar Aulach, 'Britain and the Sudeten Issue, 1938: The Evolution of a Policy', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 18 (1983), pp. 233 – 259; George W. Baer, 'Sanctions and Security: The League of Nations and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935 – 1936', *International Organisation*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1973), pp. 165 -179; Peter J. Beck, 'Searching for Peace in Munich, not Geneva: The British Government, the League of Nations and the Sudetenland Question', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 10, No. 2 – 3 (1999), pp. 236 – 257; David Faber, *Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Question* (London: Pocket Books, 2008); Stephen R. Mackinnon, *Wuhan, 1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and J.C. McKercher, 'Anschluss: The Chamberlain Government and the First Test of Appeasement, February – March 1938', *The International History Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2017), pp. 274 – 294.

<sup>19</sup> 'LES FEMMES DU MONDE ENTIER AU SERVICE DE LA PAIX ! Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), Bernadette Cattaneo archives, 1-BC-2L (1), p. 6, CHSVS.

becoming a reality, particularly in France where extreme right-wing leagues had been involved in mass demonstrations and where the fear of a resurgent Germany reigned. The appeal concluded with a plea to 'our sisters from all continents, of all social classes, of all religious or philosophical convictions, without party, or belonging to all parties attached to the cause of democracy and peace', to come together and 'put their power in the service of peace' as citizens, mothers, educators, and consumers.<sup>20</sup>

The appeals for the 1938 congress also concluded with the names of the prominent women on the CMF's *Comité d'honneur*; Ellen Wilkinson and Charlotte Despard again signed the document, as did Madeleine Rolland (the daughter of Romain Rolland), Dr Gertrud Woker (a Swiss peace activist), and Carmel Haden-Guest.<sup>21</sup> The *Comité d'honneur* was overwhelmingly European, but at least one woman from each continent was represented on it: women from Australia, Egypt, the United States, India, Syria, Uruguay and Venezuela were involved, alongside the women from France, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia who made up the majority of the body.<sup>22</sup>

By March 1939, the CMF had been 'mysteriously killed off', and would reform shortly after as the Women's World Committee for Peace and Democracy, based in London rather than Paris.<sup>23</sup> Although no reason was given for this, the controversy generated by the Moscow show trials and the Stalinist purges between 1936 and 1938 probably impacted the perception of the communist influenced CMF amongst non-communist women in such a way that a superficial change to the committee's name and a geographical move would signal a break from the Soviet Union. In addition, moves towards Nazi-Soviet rapprochement in 1939 likely contributed to the decision, even though the 'new' committee remained under the influence of the

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<sup>20</sup> 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier !' (1938), Doc. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. ; 'Aux femmes de tous les pays !' (8 April 1934), Doc. 5.

<sup>22</sup> 'Appel aux Femmes du monde entier !' (1938), Doc. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920-1939*, p. 277.



Comintern. There were 'persistent rumours of a German-Soviet agreement' from at least February 1939; Soviet concerns about its military prowess when confronted with the power of the German forces demonstrated by their role in the Spanish Civil War presented questions about the security of the USSR's borders in the event of a global conflict. British and French guarantees did not provide a satisfying answer for the Soviets.<sup>24</sup> By consequence, the Nazis and the Soviets conducted an informal dialogue throughout 1939 which would eventually culminate in the Nazi-Soviet pact in August of that year. These rumours would have negatively influenced the perception of the CMF by the public and the socialist and bourgeois women that the group was trying to court.

The new committee retained the structure of the previous organisation, with the only major differences being the group's new name and a shift in presidential control from Gabrielle Duchêne and Paris to Charlotte Haldane and London. CMF organs, including *Woman To-Day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, were still published, and many of the women who had been closely involved with the CMF were involved in the Committee for Peace and Democracy. Charlotte Haldane, editor of *Woman To-Day*, assumed the leadership of the organisation, and the language used in correspondence by the group changed to English from French.

This change in correspondence language was first apparent in the appeal for a Cuban congress entitled 'To All Mothers, To All Women' which was written in English and circulated to national sections for translation, whereas earlier congress appeals had been circulated in French. The 1939 congress appeal focused almost exclusively on women's role as a parent, spouse or relative and how this naturally predisposed them against war. The appeal utilised maternalist language more than the other appeals to convince women to support the congress; while the Marseille

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<sup>24</sup> Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 869.

congress appeal had mentioned women's role as potential mother, this appeal went further, calling for women to defend 'the safety of our hearths, the sanctity of our homes, the development of our children, the lives of our husbands, sons, and brothers'. Further it argued that 'we who have everything to lose by the wanton massacre, we who are givers of life, the makers of homes have the responsibility, the duty, and the power to make ourselves the effective instrument for the restoration of peace.'<sup>25</sup> Maternalist rhetoric was featured often in CMF campaigns on international events which tended to focus on the lot of women under fascism and war, but until 1939 it was not used to promote its congresses, instead preferring to position women as workers who had a duty to fight for their economic livelihood and the livelihoods of their sisters under fascist dictatorships.<sup>26</sup>

The focus was no longer on the threat of war created by international fascism and militarism; rather it focused almost entirely on issues faced by women in countries not under fascist dictatorship. It also encouraged a far more defensive approach than earlier appeals, which promoted offensive action against the injustices perpetrated by fascists. Women were now presented as one homogenous group with little emphasis on nationality. In fact, the only mentions of atrocities in any national context were the wars in China and Spain which were cited as preludes to a future global conflict: 'all the richness of life, all our hopes for the happiness of our loved ones are darkened by the shadow of war... war which rages today in all its brutality in Spain and China and which threatens every country and men and women everywhere'.<sup>27</sup>

The Cuban appeal did not suggest any form of intervention in conflicts across the globe; rather, the focus was entirely on the potential impact on the lives of women whose countries could be affected by war in the future. This could have been because

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<sup>25</sup> 'To all mothers, to all women' (1939), Pandor, 543\_2\_34, Doc. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Chapter four has a more detailed analysis of how the CMF utilised maternal rhetoric and imagery in its three major campaigns.

<sup>27</sup> 'To all mothers, to all women' (1939), Doc. 3.

a global conflict was viewed as inevitable by this point and as such preparing women to fight fascism in their own countries was a greater priority. In addition, the group's move from Paris to London could have had an impact on the ideology of the movement; it has been argued that the different treatment afforded to organised labour during the First World War and the 'greater suffering of the French working class' stimulated a 'more militant attitude' in France than in Britain in general.<sup>28</sup> Daniel Brower has argued that communism was more readily adopted in France because, in the face of the challenges of the 1930s, 'French communism made its peace with French political traditions' and invoked Republican language as a legitimising tool.<sup>29</sup> This was reflected in the polls: the PCF garnered around 10 percent of the vote until 1932, but 15.3 percent in 1936, while the CPGB only ever achieved 'between 0.1 and 0.3 per cent of the poll'.<sup>30</sup> This was also generally mirrored by women's activism. For example, when the French section of WILPF wanted radical action against the threat of fascism, the British section's desire to adhere to the absolute pacifist principles agreed upon at The Hague congress created 'strong divisions of opinion' in international WILPF.<sup>31</sup>

CMF congress appeals often utilised the language of sexual difference and perpetrated the stereotype that women were naturally predisposed towards peace; this was subtle in the first two congress appeals, as they did not argue that women should act as peacemakers because of their biological potential for motherhood. Rather, their new role as economic actors put them in a unique position to advocate for peace. Early CMF appeals relied on what Mona Siegel terms 'feminist pacifism', which assumed an inextricable link between feminist activism and pacifist advocacy,

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<sup>28</sup> Alison Eleanor Appleby, 'The British Left Intelligentsia and France: Perceptions and Interactions 1930 – 1944' (PhD: Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013), p. 39; see also Duncan Gillies, *Social Inequality and Class Radicalism in France and Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapter 12.

<sup>29</sup> Brower, *The New Jacobins: The French Communist Party and the Popular Front*, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 2010), pp. 36 and 38.

<sup>31</sup> Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1915 – 1965*, p. 120.

and thus women's intrinsic right to participate politically regardless of their experiences (or lack thereof) of motherhood. The appeals for the Cuban congress in 1939, however, were more heavily influenced by 'feminine pacifism', a key feature of women's activism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which assumed that women naturally despised war because of their 'close association with raising children'.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, with the rebranding of the group it was politically useful to appear less radical and more in line with the mainstream thought of British women's pacifism in this period. Furthermore, the change in leading personnel affected the tone of the committee's rhetoric; although Charlotte Haldane was a committed communist by this point, many other British feminist pacifists were far less radical than their French counterparts. It could also be the case that, in the face of the increasing likelihood of war, a complete move away from the CMF's former policies which relied more heavily on women's emancipation in communist terms was needed.

### **Delegate Composition**

The CMF was created before the Comintern moved towards rapprochement with other socialist and left-wing parties; Popular Front ideology was deployed throughout Europe in the mid- to late- 1930s as a strategy for fighting fascism. France and Spain both elected Popular Front governments in 1936 and the Comintern declared the Popular Front as its official strategy in 1935. The Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, set up by Willi Münzenberg under the auspices of the Comintern to unite activists and workers against the fascist threat, has been identified by historians as an early example of Popular Front activism in practice. The CMF was an extension of this endeavour.

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<sup>32</sup> Mona Siegel, "'To the Unknown Mother of the Unknown Soldier': Pacifism, Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Difference among French *Institutrices* Between the Wars', *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1999), p. 437.

The first CMF congress, held in Paris in August 1934, gathered over 1,100 delegates from 28 countries to protest the growing fascist threat. This figure was much lower than the number of delegates who attended either the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War in 1932 or the Pleyel European Anti-Fascist Workers' Congress in 1933, which attracted 2,196 and 3,209 delegates respectively.<sup>33</sup> However, lower numbers of attendees at women's congresses was a general feature of international activism in the 1930s; the poor economic situation meant that women were unable to travel to such meetings and as such lower delegate numbers were recorded. For example, the WILPF congress in Zurich in 1934 had ten fewer sections in attendance than the congress in Prague held five years earlier, while the IWSA had to cancel a congress planned for Athens in 1932 entirely.<sup>34</sup>

A study of the backgrounds of the delegates of the 1934 and 1938 congresses are important, because they demonstrate the extent to which the CMF was successful in attracting women from a diverse range of political ideologies, social backgrounds, and nationalities to legitimise their movement as 'above party'. Further, an analysis of the composition of the congresses provide a greater understanding of the success of Popular Front ideology in mass international movements; did the CMF achieve its goals, or did communists dominate proceedings to the point that collaboration was not truly possible?

Unsurprisingly, as the founding congress was held in France and was primarily organised by French women, a majority of delegates were French, with 630 of the 1,100 delegates who participated originating from the host country.<sup>35</sup> Britain sent the second highest number of participants, with a comparably meagre 77

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<sup>33</sup> Prezeau, 'Le mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934). Un champ d'essai du front unique', pp. 89 -91.

<sup>34</sup> Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 83 – 84.

<sup>35</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', (1934), p. 31; It is likely that representatives of France's North African colonies were included in that number, as they were grouped in the French delegation at the congress in Marseille in 1938.

delegates attending, followed by a delegation from the Saar who brought 48 women to the meeting. It was not only European women who were represented at the congress; delegates from the United States, the Soviet Union, Indonesia, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, and Australia travelled to Paris to work with women from 20 European countries.<sup>36</sup> The choice of Paris as the site of this first meeting was significant: not only was it the home of the founders of the committee, but it allowed for contact with 'knowledgeable, culturally heterogeneous' people and the use of excellent facilities, including 'accommodation, entertainment, specialised research, business transactions, and transportation and communication'. Further, the choice of European metropolises (Paris, London, Berlin or Vienna for example) as locations for international conferences reflected Eurocentric attitudes amongst activists of all shades in this period.<sup>37</sup>

National dress was deployed in the popular press to emphasise the diversity of the meeting; Reina Lewis has argued that women's 'clothes, or their absence, are frequently the means by which... distance is affected'.<sup>38</sup> Newspaper coverage of the event described women wearing the Spanish shawl, the Hindu veil, the 'darned Slavic headdress', and the bright 'kerchiefs' of Balkan women.<sup>39</sup> The races of participants were also highlighted, as a report in *L'Humanité* described the 'pale faces and blonde hair of the young and athletic Nordic delegates [and] the tanned face of a black worker'.<sup>40</sup> Mineke Bosch has argued that images of national difference in the form of costume, dance and other cultural symbols were used in IWSA congresses to give 'reality to the idea of an essential unity and equality of women', a tactic employed by

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid. p. 31; See Appendix A for the full table.

<sup>37</sup> Alan K. Henrikson, 'The Geography of Diplomacy' in Colin Flint (ed.), *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 381.

<sup>38</sup> Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934, p. 4; Marjorie Pollitt, 'WORLD MEET OF WOMEN AGAINST WAR', *The Daily Worker* (6 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> 'Plus de 1.500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.

the CMF at its meetings.<sup>41</sup> Marie Sandell has agreed that national costumes were a way 'of attracting the attention of the general public' and of 'enhanc[ing] the international atmosphere' at congresses in this period.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Leila Rupp has described women's internationalism in the first half of the twentieth century as a 'stitched together quilt of existing differences rather than a wholly new piece of cloth. Unity came out of emerging diversity'.<sup>43</sup>

However, Rupp has asserted that 'the juxtaposition of national symbols' in international women's congresses was 'pervasive' and ignored the 'potential irony of national symbols put to such use'. She has suggested that this was deliberate, as it gave congress organisers a means to 'harness the power of deeply felt national loyalties'.<sup>44</sup> In addition to this, Marie Sandell has argued that the emphasis of national dress by women's international organisations often actually 'reinforc[ed] notions of difference' and 'represented a crucial part of discourses in which Western dress was depicted as 'modern' and Eastern as backward'.<sup>45</sup>

The attendance of women from some of the delegations was unusual; German women still residing in Germany would not have been able to attend an anti-fascist congress, so we can assume that the German women who attended were refugees from the regime. Further, Soviet women were rarely involved in international activism in the period as many mass organisations were deemed too bourgeois, especially those which could be described as feminist. As a result, they were largely confined to the Comintern women's bureau and did not often contribute to

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<sup>41</sup> Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman (eds.), *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902 – 1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood between the World Wars*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>44</sup> Leila J. Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', in Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.) *The Mechanics of Internationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 218-219.

<sup>45</sup> Marie Sandell, 'A Real Meeting of Women of the East and West: Women and Internationalism in the Interwar Period', in Laqua (ed.) *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars*, p. 174 – 175.

international activism of any sort during the interwar period.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet Union was drifting far from Stalin's initial goal of building 'socialism in one country', which was rather different from the communist internationalism preached by Lenin in the years after the Revolution. However, it was still unusual for Soviet women to be involved in international activism not obviously controlled by the Soviet government.

Soviet women were entirely absent from the 1938 CMF congress proceedings. The reasons for this are unknown. Perhaps the international condemnation of Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union which had begun in 1936 or the USSR's intervention in the Spanish Civil War had caused the committee, or even the Comintern itself, to rethink the usefulness of the presence of a Soviet delegation. Despite the absence of Soviet women, 500 delegates from 22 countries met in Marseille from 13 to 15 May 1938 to reinforce women's opposition to fascism.<sup>47</sup> Eleven countries which were represented at the earlier Paris congress did not send delegates to the Marseille meeting, including Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Argentina, as well as the Soviet Union. Despite well-known American women such as Carrie Chapman-Catt holding seats on the congress's *comité d'honneur*, US women also did not travel to the meeting, 'considering the remoteness of the work' done by the Marseille congress with relation to the political situation in the USA.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, five new delegations contributed to the Marseille congress, three of which were from outside of Europe: China, India, Egypt, Finland, and Lithuania. Chinese students already had a substantial presence in France during the interwar period and were notably inspired by its revolutionary traditions to advocate 'political

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<sup>46</sup> For more on the women's section of the Comintern, see: Jean-Jacques Marie, 'The Women's Section of the Comintern, from Lenin to Stalin', in Christine Fauré (ed.) *Political and Historical Encyclopaedia of Women* (London: Routledge, 2003); Elizabeth Waters, 'In the Shadow of the Comintern: The Communist Women's Movement, 1920-43', in Sonia Kruks et al. (eds.) *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> 'La conférence internationale des femmes a commencé ses travaux à Marseille', *L'Humanité* (14 May 1938), p.2.

<sup>48</sup> 'La conférence internationale des femmes scellera l'union des amies de la paix : Une interview de Bernadette Cattaneo', *L'Humanité* (11 May 1938), p.1.



reform within Republican China'.<sup>49</sup> Chinese students were prominent in the anti-imperialist movement in Paris during the war, and a number of Chinese men who would later be prominent in the first Chinese communist government, including Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, studied French revolutionary traditions in Paris's Latin Quarter.<sup>50</sup> In addition, intellectual Afro-Caribbean women residing in Paris were involved in the anti-fascist movement, including the Martinique-born Paulette Nardal who was the secretary of a branch of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement and the first black person to study at the Sorbonne.<sup>51</sup>

Generally, though, the attendance of delegates from outside of Europe was an impressive feat; travel was an expensive, time-consuming activity which would exclude many from participation. The Marseille congress report contained far less information on the exact number of attendees per national delegation than its 1934 counterpart; however, we can safely assume the largest delegation was still French. The Czechoslovak and Swiss delegations, with 49 and 29 representatives respectively, were also delegations with significant numbers.<sup>52</sup> The Marseille congress report also highlighted the presence of six delegates from war-torn Spain, including the Republican politician Victoria Kent, Margarita Nelken, Emilia Elias, who was a director of a large school, and a 'Catalan peasant'.<sup>53</sup>

One issue caused by the attendance of women from a variety of countries was language. There are conflicting reports about how 1934 congress speeches were translated for delegates. The official congress report stated that the speeches were 'translated immediately into the three languages of the congress: English, French,

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<sup>49</sup> Annika A. Culver, 'Sheng Cheng's *Ma Mère* (1928): An Interwar Period Search for Unity Between East and West', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2017), p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 122 – 127.

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer Anne Boitin, 'In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris,' *French Colonial History*, Vol. 6 (2005), p. 127.

<sup>52</sup> 'Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p.6.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

and German', while a report in the *Daily Worker* written by a British delegate, Marjorie Pollitt, stressed that only a 'small proportion' of attendees could understand a speech given by a British woman in English.<sup>54</sup> Despite this, Pollitt stressed that the 'sincerity and fervour' of the speech was enough to break through 'all language barriers and created a profound impression' on non-English speaking delegates.<sup>55</sup> Whether translations were made instantly or not is questionable because a number of issues could have arisen in this domain; it could have been difficult to find translators, translations may not have occurred simultaneously with the speeches, or perhaps the report was false and translations did not occur at all. However, this does raise the larger question of how language was utilised in the congresses. As English, French and German were chosen as the official languages of the committee, how did delegates who did not speak these languages participate? Rupp has argued that 'the ability to communicate in one of the official languages was an artefact of class and of shifts in the world system' which meant that working-class women and women who did not speak the languages of internationalism (i.e. English, French and German) would often find it difficult to participate.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Marie Sandell has found that women at WILPF congresses, despite stressing the sense of sisterhood present at these meetings, would often spend most of their time with women from other countries which had 'similar cultures and sometimes languages', impacting the amount of communication between women from vastly different backgrounds.<sup>57</sup>

The social class of delegates was also included in both newspaper coverage and the official reports of the 1934 congress as an indicator of the unity of the meeting. The attendance of *paysannes* (translated to 'peasants', but used generally to refer to rural workers in the report) and housewives at the meeting was greeted with much

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<sup>54</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', (1934), p. 11; Marjorie Pollitt, 'Soviet Delegates in Paris', *Daily Worker* (8 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', p. 229.

<sup>57</sup> Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood between the World Wars*, p. 67.

enthusiasm by the left-wing press, as newspaper reports praised the factory workers from all over Europe, miners wives from the North, housewives from the United States, and rural workers from Brittany who had come to work with intellectuals, teachers, artists, and writers from different countries.<sup>58</sup> Despite being highlighted repeatedly in newspaper reports on the congress, there were actually few *paysannes* in attendance: only nine were counted, with four originating from France. This is not surprising: travel to Paris in this period would have been expensive even for those living in France, and thus it was inaccessible for many workers to make the journey from their homes in the countryside. While European workers surely faced difficulties in their travel to the congress, it would have been nearly impossible for *paysannes* from non-European countries to attend; the United States sent 40 delegates total to the meeting, the Soviet Union sent ten, Indonesia sent four and Argentina, Indochina, Mexico, Cuba and Australia sent one delegate apiece, of which it was unlikely that any could be considered 'rural workers' or 'peasants'.<sup>59</sup> Global travel presupposed financial security, which ultimately meant that 'elite women dominated the leadership and membership' of international women's organisations during the interwar period.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it was very unlikely that non-European *paysannes* were able to attend the congress, as the cost of travel prohibited many women from making the journey.

Regardless, women workers formed the largest group of delegates based on employment, with 350 delegates in attendance, 208 of whom were French, followed by housewives, who numbered 327. Teachers, students, nurses, rural workers, shopkeepers, cleaners, and women who held 'liberal careers' were all counted among the delegates at the first congress in 1934; in fact, women who held 'liberal careers' were the third largest group of non-French delegates, while they were also a

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<sup>58</sup> 'Plus de 1.500 déléguées de tous les pays au rassemblement des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', (1934), p. 31 ; See Appendix B for the full statistics.

<sup>60</sup> Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', p. 227.

significant portion of the French delegation. Only 18 delegates were described by the congress report as 'without designation' or employment which contributed to the CMF's propagandised image of itself as a workers' affair.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, it is impossible to compare the social composition of the first CMF meeting in 1934 and the Marseille meeting in 1938; the report generated for the Marseille congress focused much less on the differences between the delegates and did not include any information on the employment or political affiliation of the women who attended. As such, we must rely on the statistics from the first congress to gain a picture of the overall composition of the congresses. However, it would be fair to assume that, because the Marseille congress consisted of fewer than half the numbers of delegates who attended the earlier Paris congress, the Marseille meeting did not have nearly the same diversity of employment as the 1934 meeting.

In the spirit of early Popular Front rapprochement that the CMF began its work, it was crucial to demonstrate that the organisation was open to all on the left.<sup>62</sup> In 1934, the British delegation was 'directed to find what we have in common' because its delegates were so politically diverse, counting communists, socialists and Labour Party members among its ranks.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, the Marseille congress report does not contain any information about the political composition of the meeting, so we cannot be sure of the communist/socialist division of the delegates at this later stage. As such, we cannot make any conclusions about the political orientation of the delegates with certainty; however, it is important to remember that the number of participants in the Marseille congress was significantly smaller than the earlier Paris meeting and as such the political diversity of the delegates could have been much less impressive.

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<sup>61</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> The Comintern's Popular Front policy will be examined in detail in chapter three.

<sup>63</sup> Marjorie Pollitt, 'First Great International Rally of Women against War and Fascism', *Daily Worker* (11 August 1934), p. 3.

The 1934 congress report contained a table which detailed the 'political composition' of the delegates which went beyond traditional political definitions, as it also contained information on how women defined themselves in terms of their personal activism.<sup>64</sup> The number of communists who attended the congress dwarfed the number of socialist women: communist women numbered at least 320, while there were only 79 socialist and 16 'Christian socialist' women in attendance.<sup>65</sup> Although a larger proportion of communist delegates was to be expected given the communist influence on the movement, the number of socialists in attendance was still very low. Socialist and communist collaboration was not yet at the peak it would reach in 1936. It is also probable, as Emily Greene Balch suspected, that many of the women who defined themselves as communists for the purposes of the congress were not actually 'organised communists', in that they did not belong to a particular communist party.<sup>66</sup>

Also counted separately from the communists were members of the Red International of Trade Unions (or Profintern), an organisation affiliated with the Comintern, which coordinated communist work within trade unions. The Profintern's rival trade union organisation, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, a body closely associated to the LSI) also sent delegates to the CMF congress in 1934.<sup>67</sup> The Profintern sent 109 delegates, while the IFTU sent less than half that number, sending 54 delegates in total. Despite this, Carmel Haden-Guest, who presided over the first session of the 1934 congress continued to stress that it had

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<sup>64</sup> See Appendix C for the full table.

<sup>65</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 37.

<sup>66</sup> To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch/Clara Ragaz/Gertrud Baer (13 October 1934), WILPF Microfilm, Reel 2:1680.

<sup>67</sup> For further reading on the Amsterdam International, see Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), and Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920 – 1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

‘absolute independence’ from any party or organisation, despite much evidence that communists dominated proceedings at least in terms of numbers.<sup>68</sup>

The second largest number of women at the congress defined themselves as pacifists, with 158 women openly demonstrating their commitment to peace at the meeting. Considering Duchêne’s role as the president of French WILPF, it is not difficult to understand why so many pacifist women were attracted to the meeting. That the congress was designed to protest ‘against war’ as well as fascism also encouraged many pacifist women to disregard their concerns about the communist character of the meeting.<sup>69</sup> The WILPF executive committee even expressed that they deserved some credit for the congress, as they claimed that they were the first to consider the idea of a meeting against war and fascism, referring to the failed consultative congress of November 1933. The Executive Committee of the international body of WILPF expressed that they were ‘most grateful’ to Duchêne for the ‘immense trouble’ she went to hold the congress without official WILPF input. The WILPF leadership therefore believed it would be a ‘great mistake’ if the League was not represented at the meeting. A letter to the WILPF executive committee written by Camille Drevet expressed that it was

‘quite impossible... to have a women’s international organisation... which was founded to fight for Peace and Freedom, not officially represented at an International Congress protesting against War and Fascism. It would, I feel, prove what many say: that the W.I.L. is no more up to its task and no more among the peacemakers for Peace and Freedom.’<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, some women from more moderate WILPF sections who attended the 1934 CMF congress did raise concerns about the communist nature of the meeting, particularly representatives from the Swedish and Dutch sections. Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann, a member of the Dutch section of WILPF, recounted how it

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès’ (1934), p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch (18 December 1934) WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1702.

<sup>70</sup> To members of the Executive Committee of the WILPF (16 July 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1674.

had worked to encourage Dutch women from 'the most extreme left to somewhat to the right' to prepare for the congress, but they all felt a 'great deception' when the congress appeals were published and had 'an absolutely communist character'. However, Ramondt-Hirschmann believed that it would be a mistake to withdraw from the congress and remove the input of pacifist women rather than to work with communists. Instead, the Dutch delegation decided to participate in two factions: 'those who did not believe in violence under any condition whatever', and those who were against imperialist war, but not war against fascism.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Communist Character of the Congress**

While women who did not identify as communists did contribute to the meeting, the aesthetics of the congresses were almost entirely representative of communist ideals in many ways. This section will focus on the Paris congress for two reasons: first, as the founding meeting of the CMF, the physical atmosphere of the congress was important for creating expectations for what the group would stand for going forward. Would the CMF approach anti-fascist activism as a 'sans parti' organisation as it claimed in its appeals, or would the communist influence on the group dictate its responses to fascism and war? Second, the 1934 congress generated far more media interest than the Marseille meeting, with extensive information on the decoration of the Maison de la Mutualité published in the press which highlighted the communist influence on the proceedings.

It soon became clear to delegates that, despite claims that the congress was '*sans-parti*', this was not the case. The slogans which had been chosen by the organising committee to represent the meeting were one example of this. Each slogan

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<sup>71</sup> To the Vice Presidents from Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann (20 July 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 20: 1981.

hung on a large banner draped across the hall and amplified a different congress goal which would be adopted by the future CMF. These slogans are particularly useful for understanding how the CMF presented itself from the outset, which goals it prioritised, and how political ideology influenced the meeting. The first banner read '*Toutes les femmes fraternellement unies contre la guerre et le fascisme*' ('All women fraternally united against war and fascism'). It highlighted the specifically female character of the movement to clarify that this congress was a women's endeavour, separate from the already established Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. This was also reflected in the speeches of many delegates, with a focus on how women's movements had developed, and the rights women had achieved since the First World War, with focus on how their rights were now under threat of fascism. However, many women's organisations were paralysed by a desire to seem politically neutral so as not to alienate anyone; as we have seen, many of these groups refused to send delegates to a consultative WILPF congress against anti-fascism because they did not want to endorse a congress which was 'definitely directed against one political system'.<sup>72</sup> The CMF instead organised a meeting which embraced political differences among activists on the left to create unity against a common enemy: fascism. This was further demonstrated with frequent shouts from delegates of '*À bas la guerre!*' and '*Unité d'action!*' in 'the most varied languages', regardless of political orientations.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 1

The second slogan expanded on this image of the congress as a specifically female congress and represented further endorsement of women's emancipation; it

<sup>72</sup> To Mrs Forsythe from Miss A. Honora Enfield (2 November 1933), WILPF Microfilm, Reel 33: 0285.

<sup>73</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 2.



read '*Pour l'émancipation totale des femmes*' ('For the total emancipation of women'). This slogan was not only feminist, but also reflected the desire for women's emancipation professed by many socialist and communist women in this period. This socialist feminism stressed the need for a societal revolution for women to achieve true social, political, and economic emancipation. It was perhaps most famously practiced by Aleksandra Kollontai, the Soviet commissar for social welfare in the Bolshevik government after the October Revolution. Kollontai believed that a full transformation of the family under communism was the only way for women to be liberated from the 'domestic drudgery' that they experienced under late stage capitalism.<sup>74</sup> Kollontai also believed that female emancipation was necessary for the communist experiment to thrive, which often created conflict between her and the male party cadres, stemming from her radical views on sexuality and 'free love'.<sup>75</sup> However, under Stalin's regime, the Soviet government had moved away from policies which facilitated women's emancipation.

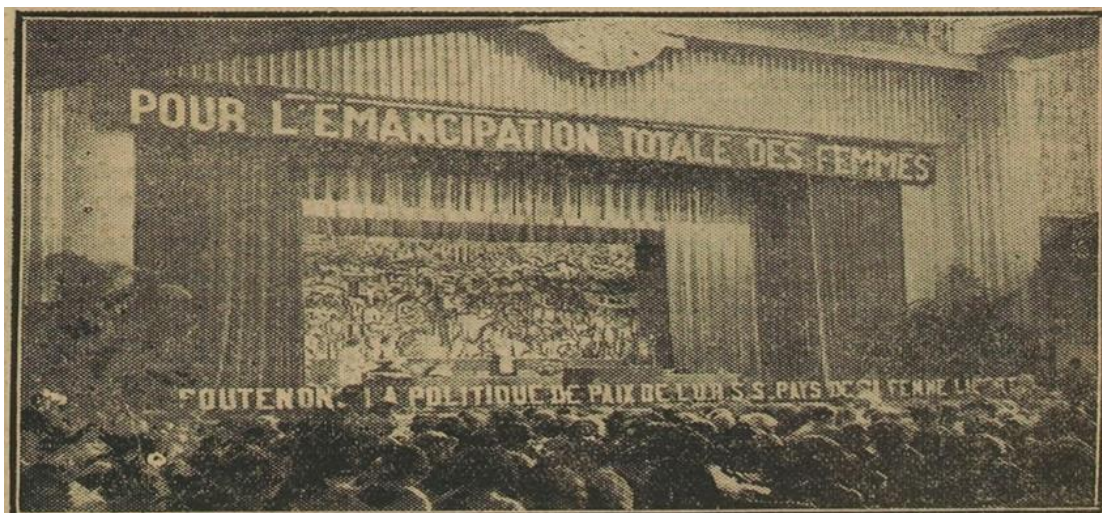


Figure 2

<sup>74</sup> Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870-1917* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 172.

<sup>75</sup> For more on Aleksandra Kollontai and her views on women's emancipation, see Alix Holt (ed.), *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1977); Barbara Evans Clements, 'Emancipation Through Communism: The Ideology of A.M. Kollontai' *Slavic Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (1973), pp. 323 - 338; Joan Roelofs, 'Alexandra Kollontai: Socialist Feminism in Theory and Practice', *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2018), pp. 166 - 175; Christine Synowich, 'Alexandra Kollontai and the Fate of Bolshevik Feminism', *Labor/Le Travail*, Vol. 32 (1993), pp. 287 - 295.

Despite this, the idea that women's total emancipation had been achieved by the Soviet state after the Revolution was still deployed for propaganda purposes. Many feminist and pacifist bourgeois women's organisations in this period also subscribed to women's emancipation, and the promotion of the equal inclusion of women in society, politics and the economy was an attractive prospect for many women involved in these organisations. Therefore, the slogan '*Pour l'émancipation totale des femmes*', while mirroring early Soviet rhetoric on women, was designed to attract politically neutral bourgeois women's groups for whom equality was an important goal.

The third slogan of the Congress was perhaps the most revealing. The slogan read: '*Soutenons la politique de paix de l'URSS, pays de la femme libérée*' ('Support the peace policy of the USSR, country of the liberated woman'). This slogan would become indicative of how the CMF prioritised different aspects of its ideology throughout its lifetime. To understand what this means, it is necessary to divide the slogan into two parts. The first part of the slogan, 'Support the peace policy of the USSR', not only demonstrated CMF affinity for Soviet communism, but also acted as propaganda which reinforced the idea that the USSR was a peace-loving nation that wanted to avoid war at all costs. Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, had advanced the idea of the total disarmament of all states or the 'complete destruction' of 'the most aggressive types of armaments' at the Disarmament Conferences held from 1932, advocating for the limitation of new chemical, incendiary and bacteriological technologies.<sup>76</sup> The Soviet disarmament proposals endeared them to bourgeois peace groups, who contrasted Soviet action on the issue of peace with the inaction of their own nations. When Litvinov voted against a resolution on delaying disarmament negotiations, 'the gallery, packed with bourgeois women, was swept into such spontaneous, riotous applause for the Soviet delegate that the guards

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<sup>76</sup> C. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 55.

couldn't get order' and ejected many of the women from the proceedings.<sup>77</sup> Adding to the communist nature of the slogan, the banner was positioned next to a large canvas painted by revolutionary Chinese artists for the occasion which evoked 'war and the mass resistance of workers'.<sup>78</sup>

The second part of the slogan, which described the Soviet Union as the 'country of the liberated woman', is also important. This reinforced the message of women's emancipation perpetrated by the first two slogans and promoted the idea that the Soviet Union was the leader on women's rights across the globe. Women in the Soviet Union theoretically had the same rights as men, could vote, had equal standing in marriage and had direct access to abortion (although it was soon made illegal again in 1936). Although not all women's groups agreed with abortion rights, it was difficult for bourgeois women's organisations in attendance at the meeting to deny that the Soviet Union positioned itself as the champion of women's emancipation.

Soviet symbolism could also be found in the atmosphere cultivated in the Maison de la Mutualité. The *Internationale* was sung often and with vigour during the meeting, evoking a sense of collective identity amongst participants. Donny Gluckstein has examined the roots of the *Internationale* in the aftermath of the Paris Commune in 1871 and has argued that the song can 'function simultaneously as history, political argument and a rallying statement'. *The Internationale* represents a 'final, all-out struggle with capitalism' which consistently evokes proletarian internationalism, epitomised by the chorus:

*'C'est la lutte finale / groupons-nous, et demain / l'Internationale sera le genre humain'.*

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<sup>77</sup> Carrie A. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1946* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 105.

<sup>78</sup> 'Plus de 1,500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement de femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.

(‘This is the final struggle / Let us group together and tomorrow / The *Internationale* / will be the human race’).<sup>79</sup>

The song was the national anthem of the Soviet Union until 1944 and was the unofficial anthem of international communism more generally throughout the interwar period. The *Internationale* was even sung at the beginning of the founding CMF congress when German delegates, in the silence of the room, spontaneously began to sing the ‘revolutionary song’ in German, to which other delegates leant their voices in various languages.<sup>80</sup> The *Internationale* was also sung after the speeches of certain delegates, such as after Antoinette Gilles spoke on the phenomenon of ‘war psychosis’.<sup>81</sup> The song was used to stimulate a feeling of unity between delegates. Attendees sang the *Internationale* as a response to many things, although it was sung most vigorously for the Soviet delegation; for example, delegates greeted the Soviet women with a rendition of the *Internationale* when the delegation finally arrived after experiencing passport issues at the French border. Elena Stasova was also greeted by delegates singing the *Internationale* and by shouts of ‘Long live the Soviet Union!’ when she rose to the podium to give her speech on the status of women in the USSR.<sup>82</sup>

The raising of delegates’ fists in the ‘red salute’ was also used to demonstrate solidarity with women from countries under fascist oppression. When German delegates sang the *Internationale* at the opening of congress, those assembled in the hall stood up and raised their fists to salute the ‘heroic delegates of the German proletariat and anti-fascists, who struggle [against fascism] under the leadership of

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<sup>79</sup> Donny Gluckstein, ‘Deciphering the *Internationale*: the Eugène Pottier Code’, *International Socialism*, Vol. 120, No. 2 (2008) [available on Marxists.org]

<sup>80</sup> ‘Plus de 1,500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement de femmes’, *L’Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Henri Barbusse a salué hier au nom du Comité Amsterdam Pleyel le Rassemblement mondial des femmes’, *L’Humanité* (7 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Un exposé précis d’Elena Stasova sur le ‘Pays de la femme libérée’, *L’Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1; Marjorie Pollitt, ‘WORLD MEET OF WOMEN AGAINST WAR’, *Daily Worker* (6 August 1934), p. 2.

the German Communist Party'.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, when a 'visibly joyous' Gabrielle Duchêne announced the arrival of the Soviet delegation, 'all the room [had their] fists raised' in the red salute, and shouted '*Les Soviets partout!*'<sup>84</sup> Concurrently, a delegate named Comrade Zinkel welcomed the Soviet delegation by raising her fist and exclaiming, 'Long live the Soviet Union! All power to the workers and peasants! Down with fascism and war!'<sup>85</sup>

The decoration of the Maison de la Mutualité was also influenced by communist symbolism; red flags were displayed around the room for the duration of the congress; for example, when Stasova gave her speech a 'magnificently embroidered red flag' was raised above the platform.<sup>86</sup> Finnish women living in America had presented this flag to the congress as a way of celebrating this first, momentous rally of women against fascism and war.<sup>87</sup> Although the Red Flag was more likely to be associated with socialist parties before 1917, the Soviet Union's adoption of a red field for their flag in 1923 encouraged many national communist parties to also adopt a red flag to represent them. Similarly, at a meeting organised by the CMF in Alfortville in the south of Paris during the congress, comrades from around the commune 'arrived in a cortege, red flags at the head, singing revolutionary hymns'.<sup>88</sup>

## Speeches

The Executive Committee of WILPF vehemently denied to its members that the congress was formally linked with the communists. It claimed that while the congress

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<sup>83</sup> 'Plus de 1,500 déléguées de tous les pays au Rassemblement de femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> 'Les déléguées des pays capitalistes acclament les travailleuses soviétiques', *L'Humanité*, (8 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Marjorie Pollitt, 'Soviet Delegates in Paris', *Daily Worker* (8 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> 'Un exposé précis d'Elena Stasova sur le 'Pays de la femme libérée', *L'Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Marjorie Pollitt, 'First Great International Rally of Women against War and Fascism', *Daily Worker* (11 August 1934), p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> 'Un exposé précis d'Elena Stasova sur le 'Pays de la femme libérée', *L'Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 1.

did demonstrate sympathy with Russia and was 'more than ready to admit all the advantages of the USSR than its failings', this was only because of the 'reluctance of the other [bourgeois] organisations to join' the anti-fascist coalition, meaning that their opinions were underrepresented.<sup>89</sup> However, Emily Greene Balch was insistent that communist influence did not prevent other voices from being heard at the meeting:

'Madame Duchêne has also the great merit of having, at the Congress, taken care that all the views could be represented; the pacifists, the Christian-socialists, the Feminists, have been able to put their views before the congress... we have had the opportunity of saying our say and of being listened to attentively.'<sup>90</sup>

The tone of the opening sessions in both 1934 and 1938 represented the content of each congress well. The first session in 1934 was opened by Carmel Haden-Guest, who spoke about how women from different backgrounds had collaborated to organise the congress, insisting on 'its absolute independence from any party or any organisation'.<sup>91</sup> She drew attention to 'the torture and imprisonment of antifascist militants' and emphasised how it was crucial that women 'formulate a plan of action against war and fascism'.<sup>92</sup> She established a common history of anti-fascism, pacifism, and activism which was intended to create a sense of unity among the delegates regardless of their political differences.

The opening session of the Marseille congress was more concerned with contemporary world events and politics, on the other hand. Geneviève Tabouis, a French journalist who reported on the rise of fascism as foreign editor of *L'Œuvre*, spoke about the developing international situation in 1938, particularly how the 'Berlin – Rome Axis' had expanded into the 'Berlin – Rome – Tokyo triangle' and the 'tragic Austrian consequences' that had arisen from this alliance.<sup>93</sup> Georges Scelle, a French

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<sup>89</sup> To Madam Waern-Bugge from Emily Greene Balch/Clara Ragaz/Gertrud Baer (13 October 1934), WILPF Microfilm, reel 2: 1680.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p.6.

<sup>92</sup> 'Le rassemblement mondial des femmes', *L'Humanité* (5 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> 'Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 7.

law professor, then discussed how to reinforce the international institutions that had been established to safeguard peace. Addressing himself to women, 'who are braver than men and who often have better sense than them', he implored them to understand that 'the policy of burying ones head in the sand has never averted peril', with 'active pacifism' being the only way to effectively protest international violations of law.<sup>94</sup> The differences between the 1934 congress and the 1938 congress demonstrated how the international situation had developed in the intervening years and how anti-fascist women reacted to the deteriorating relations between states. The fact that the opening session in 1938 was more overtly political can also be linked to the fact that the earlier meeting needed to attract a variety of different women to create a membership base and thus avoided overtly political topics for the opening session so that delegates would not feel immediately alienated. By 1938, the CMF was an established group and was able to respond politically to the decline of international relations.

One of the most impressive speeches of either congress was made by Gabrielle Duchêne on the opening day of the Paris congress on 4 August 1934. When printed for circulation with attached tables and statistics, it consisted of 32 pages of thorough research into a variety of women's issues across the globe. Duchêne was concerned with how the pace of women's emancipation had begun to slow 'since the establishment of fascist regimes', negating many of the political and societal gains that women had achieved after the First World War. Duchêne also identified a 'violent offensive' by capitalist nations against the 'most elementary right' to work for 'bread and independence'. She claimed that women's right to work was 'gravely threatened' in all countries, including in non-fascist nations like Britain, France, and Switzerland.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> Gabrielle Duchêne, 'RAPPORT : la situation des femmes au 20eme anniversaire de la guerre' (1934), Pandor, 543\_2\_1, Doc. 54, p. 1.

Duchêne utilised extensive statistics to prove many of her points. For example, she linked the shrinking number of women across the world receiving a salary to widespread unemployment; she cited a 12.6% fall in salaried women in Austria, a 10.1% drop in Denmark, a 7.9% fall in Belgium and a 2.2% fall in the USA.<sup>96</sup> She also pointed out that unemployment benefits had been removed or reduced drastically in many countries. German women were receiving 'insignificant benefits' which left them malnourished and inadequately housed, while Italian unemployment benefits amounted to only around 3.75 lira per day for three months total, with women often unable to fulfil the 'complicated conditions' to qualify.<sup>97</sup> Duchêne argued that this amounted to a severe loss of economic independence for women, which lead them to idealise the 'falsely idyllic banner' of the 'Housewife' and to desire a return to domesticity.<sup>98</sup> Women's return to the home was a major component of fascist ideology, because it was viewed as a means to stimulate the birth-rate among Aryan citizens and to provide a healthy environment in which to raise good German citizens.<sup>99</sup> The Nazis thought that a focus on domesticity over employment for women would prevent the perceived modern phenomenon of 'men who resemble women, and women who resemble men'.<sup>100</sup>

Duchêne concluded her speech by admitting that her report was not only incomplete, but unilateral, as it only presented the 'poor aspects of the world situation' and did not mention the positives. She primarily identified this in the Soviet Union: 'the only country where a new society is built, ... where women are liberated, where peace is not only a theme but a resounding discourse'.<sup>101</sup> She argued that her choice

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>99</sup> See Elizabeth Harvey, 'Visions of the Volk: German Women and the Far Right from Kaiserreich to Third Reich', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2004), pp. 152-167 and Vandana Joshi, 'Maternalism, Race, Class and Citizenship: Aspects of Illegitimate Motherhood in Nazi Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2011), pp. 832-853. There will be further discussion of the Nazi pronatalist policy in Chapter Four.

<sup>100</sup> Duchêne, 'RAPPORT : la situation des femmes au 20eme anniversaire de la guerre', p.16.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 29.



to avoid discussing the USSR was because Stasova would speak on women in the country later in the congress, but Duchêne's report lacked an honest comparison between the Soviet Union and non-communist states, making an otherwise extensive report inherently flawed. It demonstrated her bias toward the Soviet Union and the influence which dominated congress proceedings and would colour CMF work throughout its lifetime.

Duchêne also gave a speech at the 1938 Marseille congress which tackled solidarity between nations, further illustrating the vastly different priorities of the two meetings. Instead of emphasising the hardships faced by women, Duchêne as CMF president spoke on the need for a 'common resistance' against the policy of isolationism in foreign affairs practiced by western governments. She told the assembled delegates that it was 'the weakness of the democracies that made the strength of the fascist powers', repeating President Roosevelt's conviction that '90% of people would really like peace'.<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, the full text of the speech has not been transposed as her earlier speech was, but from the information available, we can deduct that Duchêne, as the main representative of the CMF at the congress, reflected the committee's growing concern about the international situation in general, rather than the woman-specific issues that the earlier congress had focused on.

The presence of Soviet women was the biggest attraction of the 1934 congress for many attendees. Stasova's speech at the third session attracted both official delegates and the general public, with as many as 2000 audience members packed into the hall to hear the head of the Soviet delegation speak. Duchêne herself chaired Stasova's session, which was essentially a propaganda exercise that positively presented the status of women in employment, education, and health in the USSR.<sup>103</sup> Stasova emphasised how the Soviet government had successfully

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<sup>102</sup> 'Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p.8.

<sup>103</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes ! Contre la guerre et le fascisme : Compte rendu des travaux du congrès' (1934), p. 11.

mobilised its large female population in work; she cited the 4 million Soviet women who had entered the workforce between 1929 and 1934, totalling 6 million women workers in all.<sup>104</sup> The early Soviet government had identified women as an underutilised source of labour and implemented several laws which protected women in the workforce, maternity and childhood, allowing women to dedicate more time to their employment. The statistics Stasova cited are probably largely accurate; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus has argued that between 1928 and 1940 the absolute number of women in the Soviet workforce increased fivefold, while in the mid-1930s, women made up '82 per cent of all newly employed workers'.<sup>105</sup> Stasova stated that the establishment of crèches had 'singularly facilitated' the growing number of women in work, as had the removal of 'heavy domestic work' from women's traditional burdens by the creation of collective kitchens and laundries. Stasova even mentioned the Soviet government's legalisation of abortion in her speech. She stressed that it was not legalised out of any real desire for women to have the choice of when to have children; rather, women who sought out 'clandestine abortions' were more likely to miss work if anything went wrong. The legalisation of abortion was intended to avoid the 'adverse consequences' of these secret procedures, so that women could have them in 'the best conditions of hygiene' possible and thus hopefully avoid death or serious injury.<sup>106</sup>

However, Stasova's speech neglected to mention the fact that many moves towards women's emancipation had been reversed by 1934. For example, the Soviet women's department, the *Zhenotdel*, had been closed. It had been set up by the

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<sup>104</sup> 'Un exposé précis d'Elena Stasova sur le 'pays de la femme libérée', *L'Humanité* (6 August 1934), p.1.

<sup>105</sup> Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, 'USSR Women at Work: Changing Patterns', *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1975), p. 180 – 181; for more analysis of Soviet women in work, see Gijs Kessler, 'Work and the Household in the Interwar Soviet Union', *Continuity and Change*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2005), pp. 409 – 442; Gur Ofer and Aaron Vinokur, 'Work and Family Roles of Soviet Women: Historical Trends and Cross-Section Analysis', *Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1985), pp. 328 – 354.

<sup>106</sup> 'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', (1934), p. 12; for a discussion of Stalinist family policies, see Lauren Kaminsky, 'Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union', *Central European History*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2011), pp. 63 – 91.

Soviet politicians Inessa Armand and Aleksandra Kollontai in 1919 to educate women on their rights in the new socialist society, initiating several campaigns designed to improve women's literacy and educate them politically. However, some of its campaigns were controversial, as when it orchestrated de-veiling campaigns on Muslim women in Soviet Central Asia.<sup>107</sup> The *Zhenotdel* was closed in 1930, with the explanation that the Soviet government had fully emancipated women from the shackles of capitalist society and as such there was no longer any need for a separate women's organisation. This was an example of the Soviet government's turn towards more 'traditional' views of women's role in the family in the mid-1930s. Abortion was outlawed again in the Soviet Union under the 'In Defence of Mother and Child' decree passed in 1936, which was presented as an 'attempt to strengthen the Soviet family' in response to fears about slow population growth. However, Janet Evans has identified it as 'another aspect of the political repression which was a prominent feature of Soviet politics in the second half of the 1930s'.<sup>108</sup>

Regardless of the reality, the Soviet Union continued to use the idea that their female citizens were emancipated in their international propaganda to manipulate the image of the country and its political ideology among western feminists. Stasova's speech presented the USSR as the '*pays de la femme libérée*' to convince the bourgeois women in attendance of the USSR's achievements in this area; *L'Humanité* reported that 'the fever with which the delegates of all countries and of all [political] tendencies and [social] conditions took notes, both during the report and the translations [of Stasova's speech]' emphasised how well 'the precise arguments

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<sup>107</sup> For more on the Zhenotdel, see Barbara Evans Clements, 'The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1992), pp. 485 – 496, and Carol Eubanks Hayden, 'The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party', *Russian History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (1976), pp. 150 – 173.

<sup>108</sup> Janet Evans, 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Women's Question: The Case of the 1936 Decree 'In Defence of Mother and Child'', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16 (1981), p. 757.

about the grandiose achievements which only the Soviet regime could achieve' were received by the delegates.<sup>109</sup>

The speeches made at the Marseille congress did not focus as much on the Soviet Union as the speeches at the Paris congress. Rather, they tended to tackle the harmful effects of right-wing political ideologies across the globe. For example, Irene Kirpal, a member of the Czechoslovak national assembly who spoke on the 'solidarity and collaboration of nations', expressed her belief that the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1938 represented the 'pivot of world political tension'.<sup>110</sup> One specific question posed by the congress was what democracy meant in practice in the new global situation in 1938; the Czech feminist activist Františka Plamínková examined the 'democratic base of relations between individuals, the nation, and in international life' in her speech. She made it clear to attendees that democracy must always be 'the government of the people, by the people, and for the people'.<sup>111</sup>

The 1938 congress also stimulated discussion of how religious differences could be used in the service of peace and democracy in response to growing prejudice against certain religious minorities. A Protestant woman, a Catholic woman and a Jewish woman talked individually about how pacifism and religion were inextricably linked. Constance Coltman, the first British woman ordained to Christian ministry, linked pacifism with the teachings of Christ. She stated that when religion was employed in the service of 'reaction and repression', it was not representative of 'the true teachings of Jesus, who proclaimed that peace must be the goal as well as the means'.<sup>112</sup> Germaine Malaterre-Sellier represented the Catholics, and, drawing on her faith, denounced the deceptions often perpetrated by national governments in the form of lying and breaches of treaties; she argued that these misdeeds would be

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<sup>109</sup> 'Un exposé précis d'Elena Stasova sur le 'pays de la femme libérée', *L'Humanité* (6 August 1934), p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> 'Compte rendu de la Conférence Internationale des Femmes, Marseille 13-14-15 Mai 1938' (1938), p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

'considered as degrading for individuals', but nations consistently behaved in contemptible ways with no real consequences. Malaterre-Sellier believed that there was a desperate need for morality to be restored in international relations which she argued could be found in religion, providing infinitely precious help' to the poor international situation.<sup>113</sup>

Arguably the most important speech of the Marseille congress was given by Juliette Pary, a Jewish journalist, in response to the increasingly overt anti-Semitism practiced by the Nazi state. Pary argued that anti-Semitism was the complete antithesis of peace and that the phrase 'Death to Jews' had been utilised by the Nazi party to mask their larger goals of territory expansion and aggression against all non-Aryan minorities. In her estimation, anti-Semitism was the first step on the destructive path chosen by the Nazis. Nazi tactics were

'first, to crush the Jews, then [German] citizens, finally other countries. The progress of Nazism has catastrophically increased the number of stateless people, uprooted, pauperised, forced into migration. All borders are closed. A world problem is posed, not only for Jews, but for refugees of any origin.'<sup>114</sup>

She pointed to the growth of anti-Semitic aggression in many countries, but particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, including Germany, Austria, Poland, Romania, and Hungary. For Pary, the 'Jewish spirit' represented everything that the CMF stood for; it was a stance against violence and murder which took as its base 'the necessity of universal peace' as '3000 years ago... the prophets preached fraternity between nations as between individuals'. Pary concluded by advocating a sisterhood between Jewish women and anti-fascist women which fought

'racism and anti-Semitism, for the maintenance of rights of asylum for refugees, for the boycotting of products sold by aggressor nations, for justice, freedom and peace, of which the Judaism of today, as that of other times, is inextricably linked'.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

The 1934 congress and the 1938 congress had very different overall themes, and very different overall goals: the earlier congress was organised on early concepts of Popular Front ideology and was oriented towards being viewed as a serious women's mass anti-fascist organisation. It was intended to demonstrate the fact that the CMF was a separate entity from the larger Amsterdam-Pleyel movement and did not reside in its shadow. The content of the congress tended to veer away from the overtly political except in its condemnation of fascism and war; despite the communist aesthetics of the meeting, the speeches were more focused on women's issues than communist ones. That is not to say that a Soviet bias did not expose itself through the speeches; Stasova's speech on the progress of women in the USSR was by far the most anticipated moment of the four-day meeting and Duchêne neglected to discuss Soviet women in her important and otherwise comprehensive analysis of issues facing women across the globe. The Marseille congress was far more concerned with the international political problems of the day, preferring to discuss larger events stemming from conflict and aggression. This was exemplified best by the CMF's focus on the threat that Nazi expansionism posed in Europe and the consistent weakening of the League of Nations by underhanded relations between states. However, it was also concerned with how these overarching political trends affected women and minorities at the base, demonstrating a nuanced concept of how growing anti-Semitism was an unacceptable and dangerous trend which would influence how other minorities and vulnerable people would be treated over time.

## **Conclusion**

CMF congresses were the site of the fusion of the ideologies of communism, antifascism, and feminism under the banner of internationalism. The congresses were intended to demonstrate the solidarity of women from various backgrounds against the growing threat of fascism. Communist women dominated proceedings both in

terms of numbers of delegates and in the communist influence on the congress, but socialist and pacifist women were present at these meetings and did contribute as speakers. This presented opportunities for collaboration between communist and socialist women which would otherwise have not occurred, predating the earliest official Comintern Popular Front policy. It also opened the way for further official collaboration between women on the left in the form of local and national CMF committees, allowing for exchanges of information and ideas between women in the West and the Soviet Union. CMF congresses were permeated by communist influence, which stimulated expectations about how the CMF would conduct its business and set itself apart from its international feminist counterparts who often eschewed politics in fear that they would not seem legitimate in their political dealings; it was clear to many of the non-communist women in attendance that CMF work would be heavily influenced by communist ideology and could potentially prioritise communist concerns over feminist or pacifist ones. The communist character of these meetings mirrored the priorities of the CMF leadership, whether it was the overtly communist Bernadette Cattaneo or the fellow-travelling Gabrielle Duchêne. They wanted to create a committee of women united in their efforts against fascism, but the endeavour was consistently overshadowed by the communist sympathies of the leaders and their links to communist internationalists. Curiously, there was a Soviet presence at the 1934 meeting in the form of the Soviet delegation headed by Elena Stasova, but Soviet women were conspicuously absent from the 1938 congress for reasons unknown.

CMF congresses were also important because they demonstrated how the committee marketed itself to women from different backgrounds. However, these congresses were not entirely representative of women across the globe; because the congresses were hosted in France, they were largely European and focused mostly on European problems at the expense of major events occurring outside of the

continent. Language created problems of inclusion, as business was primarily conducted in French, English, and German at the international level, excluding non-western women and women who did not have access to language education, further making it likely that many of the women who attended had a bourgeois background. It would also be generally impossible for women from outside of Europe without a sizeable income to travel and participate.

The CMF became more overtly political at their meetings as the 1930s progressed, although this does not necessarily translate to a more communist stance. Rather the CMF perhaps felt comfortable after four years of antifascist work to take a more aggressive, political approach in the form of vocal criticism at the 1938 congress to the atrocities committed by Germany and Japan. The appeal for the 1939 congress, although it did not go ahead, demonstrates how the CMF had changed by the end of its lifetime and how the geographical shift from Paris to London had affected the committee; this appeal advocated a more defensive stance which emphasised how to prevent war in non-fascist countries, rather than the active fight against fascism that was previously the case. It also leant more heavily on traditional images of women as mothers, daughters, and sisters, to persuade women of the necessity of organising to defend their 'hearths' and the 'sanctity' of their homes. Their role as the 'giver of life' was presented as the main reason that they should participate in CMF congresses. Maternalist rhetoric was already a feature of CMF campaigns to attract as many women as possible to contribute to them, but it had not really been used in CMF congress appeals until this point; perhaps the changes that the CMF had gone through earlier in 1939 demanded a wider approach to attracting members which did not rely solely on politics. Further, women were presented as a homogenous group, eschewing national differences as a means of stimulating unity amongst the targets of the appeals. As the congress was cancelled with the outbreak of war, it is not known to what extent the CMF's priorities had actually changed during 1939 and how they



would have affected the content of the congress. However, if we expand the rhetoric of the Cuban congress appeal, we can assume that the meeting would largely consist of discussions on how women as mothers could protest the prevailing threat of war in their own countries, rather than how to combat fascism globally as economic actors.

## Chapter Four

### **The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme*, the Soviet Union, and the Comintern**

The nature of relations between the CMF and the Soviet Union has not yet been fully investigated by historians. It is undeniable that communist women constituted a larger portion of the group's membership than any other political group and they were represented in the organisation's leadership by Bernadette Cattaneo and Maria Rabaté, the communist president of the French section of the CMF. However, no evidence of formal links between the group and the Comintern have been determined by the historiography. Emmanuelle Carle acknowledged that the CMF openly condemned the links between capitalism and war by 'offsetting them against the Soviet ideal' of peace, but she stopped short of identifying the CMF as a Comintern body. Carle stated that there was a 'real desire among women of all tendencies to create a feminist peace movement against the threat of fascism' which came with the caveat that promoting peace sometimes meant defending the Soviet Union, which had cultivated an image of itself as 'the revolutionary homeland... the country that had emancipated women' and the so-called 'bulwark of peace and of the brotherhood of peoples'.<sup>1</sup> However, for Carle, the fact that Duchêne actively encouraged socialist women to contribute to the CMF was evidence that the Soviet Union did not control the committee; Duchêne's assertion that the meeting of women against war and fascism held in 1934 'was prompted by no party, nor even by the Amsterdam movement, although the latter has given us their most sincere support' was taken as irrefutable fact.<sup>2</sup>

The digitisation programme orchestrated by the Université de Bourgogne has allowed us to re-evaluate Soviet influence on the CMF. It is now clear that the

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<sup>1</sup> Carle, 'Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary', p.308.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 308.

Comintern and the CMF were formally linked, as the committee was considered by the Comintern as one of its mass auxiliary organisations. However, questions about the extent of the relationship remain. Did the Comintern seek to dominate the affairs of the CMF in the same way that it did with the Amsterdam-Pleyel organisation? It could be the case that the Amsterdam-Pleyel group was considered as a greater priority for the Comintern because it was a mixed-gender organisation which was publicly represented by prominent interwar intellectuals. It is possible that the CMF's designation as an anti-fascist organisation for women made it less of a priority for the Comintern leadership than other communist auxiliary organisations, thus providing a level of freedom of choice that other communist front organisations did not have.

As we have seen, there was certainly a history of communist influenced anti-fascism during the interwar period, and this chapter demonstrates that the CMF was not unique as a communist-front anti-fascist organisation. Rather, its unique character lay in the fact that it was a *women's* anti-fascist organisation created in conjunction with the Comintern at a time when the Soviet government was repressing feminist actions in its own country; it claimed that women had achieved full equality with men under the Soviet system 'at the same time that a host of other patently false assertions of the achievements of utopian objectives became the stock-in-trade of the Soviet press'.<sup>3</sup> There will also be an examination of the communication between the leaders of the CMF and prominent Soviet women. Further, to understand power dynamics between the Soviet government and ordinary CMF women, a visit made by French and Belgian CMF members to the Soviet Union will also be examined. This trip allowed both sides to gather information on the other: CMF members were gaining propagandised, first-hand experience of life in the Soviet Union, while the Comintern used the visit to monitor some of the most prominent rank-and-file members of the CMF, demonstrating particular interest in the socialists of the delegation. In addition,

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<sup>3</sup> Evans Clements, 'The Utopianism of the Zhenotdel', p. 496.

these visits were a propaganda exercise as the delegates produced speeches and articles on the superior Soviet system on their return to their countries.

### **The Development of a Popular Front Strategy and France**

There is much debate about when the Popular Front strategy officially became the central policy of international communist politics, with several dates between February 1934 and July 1935 offered as the start of the Popular Front era. Gerd-Rainer Horn has described this year as an “intermediary” period for the Comintern, which was marked by small moves towards collaboration with other political groups, in contrast to the strict ‘class against class’ policy previously pursued by the International.<sup>4</sup> However, what is certain is that the first examples of collaboration between communists and socialists in the 1930s occurred in France. On 6 February 1934, extreme right-wing paramilitary and veterans’ organisations protested in Paris against rumoured corruption in the Radical Party, the governing party in France at the time. In December 1933, a number of Radical Party politicians were implicated in the Stavisky scandal, and ‘the traditional theme of Republican corruption became the focus for a prolonged assault on the political establishment’ by the right-wing, which had grown in strength throughout the interwar period.<sup>5</sup> An *Action Française* press campaign had published a story that Alexandre Stavisky, a Ukrainian Jewish fraudster who was wanted by the police, had donated to the Radical Party and claimed that Stavisky’s ‘business operations had been endorsed by several Radical politicians, and... he had escaped justice thanks to the patronage of friends in high places’. When Stavisky committed suicide when hiding from police, rumours abounded that he had

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<sup>4</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Jenkins, ‘Plots and Rumours: Conspiracy Theories and the Six Février 1934’, *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2011), p. 650; for a detailed examination of the Stavisky scandal, see Paul Jankowski, ‘Stavisky and his Era’, *French Politics and Society*, Vol.10, No. 2 (1992), pp. 48 – 65.

been silenced to prevent further secrets about corruption in the Radical Party from being exposed.<sup>6</sup>

After the Radical prime minister resigned because of the scandal, another Radical politician, Edouard Daladier, was asked to form a government, and immediately began removing the senior officials in the police and judiciary who had been implicated in the Stavisky affair. Included in Daladier's dismissals was the Paris Prefect of Police, Jean Chiappe, who was 'famed for being tough on communist demonstrators and lenient towards extreme-right leagues'. Chiappe has been described as a 'bête-noire' of the Left and was popular with Parisian conservatives, and as such Daladier's attempt to remove Chiappe was seen 'as a ploy to win the support of the Socialists in the Chamber of Deputies'.<sup>7</sup> Right-wing newspapers perpetuated this idea, with some presenting it as a plot to include communists in government; a pamphlet published by the nationalist group, the *Croix de feu*, for example, declared that 'a Government in the service of the red flag is trying to reduce you to slavery'.<sup>8</sup> As a result, demonstrations were called for the 6 February 1934 by extreme-right paramilitary groups including *Action Française*, the *Jeunesse Patriotes*, the *Croix de Feu*, and *Solidarité Française*, who were joined on the streets by veterans organisations including the *Union Nationale des Combattants*. The mobilisation ended in violence on the Place de la Concorde, when police defending a bridge which accessed the Palais Bourbon opened fire on the protesters, killing thirteen and fatally wounding six others.<sup>9</sup> As many as twelve others were killed in further unrest in the following days.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Jenkins, 'The Six Février and the 'Survival' of the French Republic', *French History*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2006), p. 334.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 334.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Warner, 'The Stavisky Affair and the Riots of February 6<sup>th</sup> 1934', *History Today*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1958), p. 380.

<sup>9</sup> Jenkins, 'Plots and Rumours: Conspiracy Theories and the Six Février 1934', p. 650.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington, *France and Fascism: February 1934 and the Dynamics of Political Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 1.

Daladier responded to these protests by resigning on the 7 February, and Gaston Doumergue, the former President of the Republic, formed a '*gouvernement de trêve*' which rejected the Radical and Socialist coalition which had previously held power in favour of a Centre-Right majority.<sup>11</sup> The violence of extreme-right organisations had unseated a democratically elected government. The left also widely regarded the Doumergue government as 'pre-fascist' and saw it as an indicator that fascism was on the ascendancy in France. In response, the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), the socialist trade union federation, called for a twenty-four-hour strike on 12 February in protest, with communists planning demonstrations on the same day in solidarity. Brian Jenkins has described the 12 February mobilisation as 'a massive success, marked by spontaneous displays of grass-roots unity between Socialist and Communist participants'.<sup>12</sup> In the face of 'fascism on the march', there was a 'growing restiveness' among French communists with the policies of the Comintern which stressed political isolation. Both French socialists and communists had begun to raise the 'question of leftist unity', particularly Jacques Doriot. Although Doriot was expelled from the party in March 1934 for disregarding the party line on socialist collaboration, Comintern leaders in Moscow eventually authorised a 'unity of action pact against fascism' for French socialists and communists, which was signed in July 1934.<sup>13</sup> This signified the first major change in official Comintern policy in the Third Period and was an indicator of the Popular Front policy which would define communist activities in the late part of the 1930s. Jules Humbert-Droz, a Swiss communist, posited that the 'Popular Front [was] imposed by the workers themselves, who gave the Comintern leadership and the German Stalinists the most sensational lesson in truth in the history of the workers' movement'.<sup>14</sup> However, Gérard Noirel has argued that the riots in response to the Stavisky scandal demonstrated a worrying

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, 'The Six Février and the 'Survival' of the French Republic', p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 335.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, 'Soviet Anti-Fascism: Theory and Practice, 1921-45', p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Carr, *The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935*, p. 152.

move towards the right in France. He argued that they 'marked a crucial moment in the history of modern France because they opened a period of violent confrontations between the extreme right and the extreme left which would end in the collapse of the Third Republic and the triumph of the Vichy regime... it was at this moment at the problem of 'racism' erupted into French public space'.<sup>15</sup>

It is also important to briefly mention the official adoption of the Popular Front by the Comintern because it did dictate how the CMF operated. Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist, Reichstag fire accused, and former head of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, was named as the new secretary of the Comintern in April 1934 and immediately set about reforming Comintern policy; at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in July 1935, Dimitrov announced the need for a 'broad people's anti-fascist front' against the 'open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinistic and...imperialist elements of finance capital'.<sup>16</sup> The four week congress was spent discussing fascism, and was the first Comintern congress to advocate that communist parties work with socialist parties to defeat fascism. Dimitrov consistently made it clear that there was no universal definition of fascism and that national context was important when deciding how to tackle the threat. He also rejected the spectre of 'social fascism'. Dimitrov told the assembled communists that

'it would be a gross mistake to lay down any sort of universal scheme of the development of fascism, valid for all countries and all people...[as] it would result in indiscriminately thrusting into the camp of fascism those sections of the population which, if properly approached, could at a certain stage of development be brought into the struggle against fascism or could at least be neutralised...such an enemy must be known to perfection from every angle'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gérard Noirel, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France (XIXe-XXe siècle) : Discours publics, humiliations privées* (Paris : Fayard, 2007), p. 375.

<sup>16</sup> Payne, 'Soviet Anti-Fascism: Theory and Practice, 1921-45' p. 23

<sup>17</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, 'Unity of the Working Class against Fascism', 13 August 1935 [<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/unity.htm>] Accessed 16.03.2018

## **The CMF and Soviet Women**

This was the context in which the CMF was founded in 1934. This section will discuss how the Soviet Union and the CMF collaborated to understand the extent of communist influence on the organisation: is the best definition of the CMF one which stresses its designation as a communist-front organisation, designed to spread propaganda among female socialists involved in anti-fascist work? Or was the CMF largely left to its own devices with an element of freedom in the issues they chose to tackle? Münzenberg was not closely involved in the administration of the CMF, in contrast to his active role in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement. Rather, the CMF leadership (some of whom, including Duchêne, had worked in the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement) created the organisation as a means of mitigating the fact that the specific threats faced by women under fascism and war had been neglected by the Münzenberg committee in favour of more visible atrocities.

The CMF was certainly financed by communists to some extent, but it was likely funded by the PCF rather than directly from the Comintern. However, the CMF papers hold no clues as to how much money they received, nor how it was utilised in their work. It is unlikely that this funding was substantial and was probably only provided directly to the international executive committee; as we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, Cattaneo complained that the committee was not being aided enough financially by the PCF. In addition, national sections largely relied on membership subscriptions, meaning that smaller national sections had to scale back their work and appeal to the executive committee for funds, thereby affecting their ability to attract more women to their ranks.

There were clear links between the Comintern and the CMF from its inception. Not only was there open collaboration between Soviet and CMF women at international congresses, but Cattaneo was charged by Dimitrov himself to organise



the world movement of women against war and fascism because of her prominent role in the PCF.<sup>18</sup> In addition, contact was maintained between the CMF leadership (communist or otherwise) and prominent Soviet women throughout the committee's lifetime: Cattanéó was the main point of contact between the CMF and the Soviet Union, but she was by no means the only CMF member to engage with Soviet women. Cattanéó had a particularly close relationship with Stasova, with whom she had a written correspondence until 1939. Stasova was the CMF's main conduit for information from the Soviet Union and the contact to whom information on the CMF was transmitted for the Comintern. She was considered an 'old Bolshevik' and was revered for her active role in the revolutionary struggle and her work in the Soviet government after the revolution. She was a Comintern representative to the KPD during the 1920s, after which she was made the head of International Red Aid (MOPR), an aid organisation which was designed to be a Comintern controlled version of the Red Cross. She was also appointed to the International Control Commission of the Comintern at the Seventh World Congress in 1935. Stasova managed to avoid arrest during the Stalinist terror, despite Stalin telling Dimitrov that he had realised that Stasova was 'scum' and would 'probably' be arrested.<sup>19</sup> She was removed from her post at MOPR shortly after Stalin made this statement, but she somehow retained her position on the International Control Commission until the Comintern's dissolution in 1943, despite her apparent fall from favour.

The CMF archives contain a file which consists of correspondence between Cattanéó and Stasova. It is largely made up of information bulletins that Cattanéó had sent Stasova, which were produced by the CMF to inform readers on recent fascist atrocities, imperialist aggression, developments in the Soviet Union, and CMF work. However, there are a few examples of direct correspondence between Cattanéó and

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<sup>18</sup> Pudal and Pennetier, *Le souffle d'octobre 1917 : L'engagement des communistes français*, p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, 'Private conversation with Stalin', in Ivo Banac (ed.) *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 69.

Stasova which demonstrate a sense of friendly rapport between the two. Mineke Bosch has argued that letter writing between activists of different nationalities in the early part of the twentieth century 'was a powerful means of cementing solidarity both through communicating ideas and by enabling women to develop intimacy with each other'.<sup>20</sup> This can certainly be seen in the Cattanéó/Stasova correspondence: for example, Cattanéó sent a friendly letter in 1934 thanking Stasova for advice that she had given her and for pictures which Stasova had sent to be used in CMF publications.

The letter which Stasova sent to Cattanéó in the first place is not contained in these archives, but we can infer that the advice was likely related to CMF work. In her reply, Cattanéó further updated Stasova on the progress made by the CMF: for example, Cattanéó commented on the committee's spectacular growth in France, where 'more than 600' groups had been created and others were still being set up. She complained that French newspapers were unwilling to publicise the CMF's journal *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* and as such subscription numbers were not as high as they could have been. She also complained that the French communist newspaper *L'Humanité* had failed to publicise a recent meeting, but she did emphasise that other left-wing, non-communist papers, including *L'Oeuvre* and *Quotidien*, had covered the meeting. As a result, the room that they had hired was 'too small' because so many people had turned up. However, if *L'Humanité* and *Le Populaire* had publicised the event, Cattanéó estimated the audience 'would have been double' the number who attended.<sup>21</sup>

Cattanéó also updated Stasova on the growth of the CMF in countries outside of France, stating that the 'campaign for the Saar was a good success' and praising the Spanish national committee as 'magnificent' because 'unity had very much been

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<sup>20</sup> Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: 'at the crossroads of several interlocking identities', p. 551.

<sup>21</sup> From Bernadette Cattanéó to Elena Stasova (1934), Pandor, 543\_2\_2, Doc. 31.

realised' there.<sup>22</sup> Cattanéó held Stasova in high regard as she identified her as an important figure in Soviet politics in the interwar period: Cattanéó wrote that she 'loved and admired Stasova' and she was 'very proud of this friendship and the affection' between them. Stasova was a 'true communist', 'absolutely devoted' to the cause, who had an 'extraordinary' level of intelligence which developed as she evolved into her role as a communist activist. Cattanéó believed that Stasova only wanted to do good, and for this reason was the 'most strictly human' communist politician active in this period in her opinion.<sup>23</sup>

There was a level of comradeship between the two women which was demonstrated at its most dramatic in 1939 when Cattanéó visited Moscow. She met with Stasova who told her 'with tears in her eyes' that she believed that the Soviet government thought she was 'treasonous', and that it was unlikely that Stasova and Cattanéó would meet again. Cattanéó wrote: 'We kissed each other, and I had the certainty that I would not see Hélène Stasova and the USSR again – something broke, and my ideal collapsed miserably'.<sup>24</sup> This meeting occurred in the year that Cattanéó first began to doubt her allegiance to communism because of the political purges in the USSR; Cattanéó eventually broke with the Comintern and the PCF because of her disillusionment with the Soviets following the Nazi-Soviet pact, but seeing people she viewed as true communists punished for imagined treasons undoubtedly had an impact on her change of opinion.

Stasova was also involved in resolving questions about CMF business. For example, Marcelle Leroy, the president of the Belgian WILPF section and the founder of the Belgian CMF section, wrote to Stasova in 1936 about the growth of the Belgian committee. Leroy, who had been on the 'temporary secretariat' charged with organising the first world congress of women against war and fascism in 1934, also

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Doc. 31.

<sup>23</sup> 'Notes Manuscrites : Stasova et Kollontai' (1939), Bernadette Cattanéó papers, 2-BC-1(A), CHSVS.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

edited the Belgian CMF journal *Femmes*.<sup>25</sup> Leroy wrote to Stasova asking for advice on how to increase the circulation of the journal; they had sold 5,000 copies, but Leroy believed that this 'was not enough'. However, the letter also had a personal dimension, as Leroy thanked Stasova with 'all her heart' for the 'kindness' she had shown Leroy's daughter when she visited Moscow. Leroy wrote that with Stasova's help, her daughter's stay in Moscow had taught her 'many things and... [she] continue[d] her studies with great courage' on her return to Belgium.<sup>26</sup>

In another letter written by Stasova to an unidentified person, she offered advice on how to encourage British feminists to join the CMF; although there was a British CMF section from the outset, many bourgeois women's organisations still treated the committee with suspicion because of its relationship with the Comintern. This concerned Stasova because it left space for British women activists to develop their own anti-fascist movement which would create 'new difficulties and would make us waste precious time'. She was also concerned that any organisation created by middle-class British women against fascism would be in a financially superior position. Stasova was adamant that bourgeois British women not be given 'the opportunity to govern us, or rather make us depend on them from the financial point of view'.<sup>27</sup>

Stasova also received letters from women in countries which had not set up a CMF national section. For example, American anti-fascist activism operated on a far smaller scale than in Europe. Although an American League against War and Fascism (ALWF) was established in the 1930s, the reaction to the spread of fascism was slower due to an already established anti-war movement, as well as a growing fear of communism amongst the general populace. As such, an American section of the CMF was never created. Despite this, Stasova did receive letters from American

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<sup>25</sup> José Gotovich, *Du Communisme et des Communistes en Belgique : Approches critiques* (Brussels : Éditions Aden, 2012), p. 407., *Du Communisme et des Communistes en Belgique : Approches critiques*, p. 403.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Marcelle Leroy to Elena Stasova (15.02.1936), Pandor, 543\_2\_14, Doc. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Elena Stasova to Unknown (13.12.1937), Pandor, 543\_2\_23, Doc. 103.

women who were also in communication with the French leaders of the CMF about anti-fascism. The most prominent of these women was Ella Reeve 'Mother' Bloor, a labour organiser, feminist, and member of the CPUSA. Bloor, a long time socialist, joined the CPUSA in 1920 and was one of only two women to serve on the Central Committee of the party for more than a decade in the period between 1921 and 1961.<sup>28</sup> A *Life* magazine photo-essay described her as embodying 'the unswerving determination to make life happier for the world's unfortunates' and as a 'lively, indefatigable propagandist'.<sup>29</sup> Bloor consistently emphasised issues around motherhood and the family in her articulation of communist politics as she 'identified the political and economic inequalities of women with the oppression of the working masses'.<sup>30</sup> Some scholars have used this focus on motherhood and the family as a reason to minimise her importance in the CPUSA; Elsa Jane Dixler has argued that Bloor's rhetoric of motherhood 'effectively depoliticised her', as it meant that she was perceived as capable, admirable, loveable – without being a leader'.<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Brown has disputed this view, arguing that Bloor was the symbol of the 'Americanisation' of communist politics in the USA and 'its commitment to women's rights, and its practical... approaches to the nation's political and social problems'. Furthermore, she claims that Bloor played 'a real and significant role in the transformation of the CP from a small, isolated, male-identified party into a mass political and social movement whose membership was about 30 percent female'.<sup>32</sup>

Bloor was committed to anti-fascist activism in the latter half of the 1930s, which was again interwoven with the rhetoric of motherhood. She led the American delegation to the CMF's 1934 congress in Paris and had been elected to the

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<sup>28</sup> Harvey Klehr, 'Female Leadership in the Communist Party of the United States of America', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1977), p. 401.

<sup>29</sup> 'United States Fascism and Communism', *Life* (26 July 1937), p. 27

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen A. Brown, 'The "Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World" of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: Feminism, Maternalism and "Mother Bloor"', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1999), p. 540

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 545; Elsa Jane Dixler, 'The Woman Question: Women and the American Communist Party, 1929 – 1941' (PhD: Yale University, 1974), p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, 'The "Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World" of the Communist Party, U.S.A.', pp. 543 and 547.

International Committee of the Struggle Against War by the 1932 Amsterdam congress in her absence.<sup>33</sup> In an article written to encourage women to join the ALWF, Bloor claimed that women should relate to 'the utter disregard of the sacredness of human life' shown by fascists and understand the threat that fascism posed to '*our* work, *our* homes, *our* lands'. This opened Bloor up to accusations of maternalism and the 'essentialisation' of women in their biological role as mothers both by her contemporaries and by historians.<sup>34</sup> In Bloor's correspondence with Stasova, she described herself as 'working very hard' at the 'very good Congress against War and Fascism' in Cleveland, Ohio held in 1936. She expressed her disappointment that the 'women's commission' was 'not as large as it should have been' but explained that she had just completed a jail sentence and had also just finished 'a very long trip of 9,000 miles through the farm districts of the country' and had been unable to personally contribute to the construction of a women's anti-fascist movement in the USA. However, she dedicated herself to 'taking a more decisive part' in the fight against fascism. Bloor worried that her personal interest in the movement had been underestimated by CMF women 'because of the long silences of the American women' on the topic.<sup>35</sup>

Bloor related an interesting anecdote about the presence of fascism in the USA which demonstrated the seriousness with which American communists confronted the growing threat. Bloor was speaking at a mass meeting 'against fascist rule in our southern territories among the Negroes' and was 'thrilling with the terrors of the persecution of Negroes' when a messenger approached the platform. The messenger asked for a few men to go to the nearby German Workers' Club 'to help them to resist an attack by men in Storm Trooper uniforms, with the Swastika on their

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<sup>33</sup> Kathleen A. Brown, 'Ella Reeve Bloor: The Politics of the Personal in the American Communist Party' (PhD: University of Washington, 1996), p. 343.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, 'The "Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World" of the Communist Party, U.S.A.', p. 549.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Ella Reeve Bloor to Elena Stasova (16.01.1936), Pandor, 543\_2\_14, Doc. 1.

black caps, who had raided their club'. She proudly related that the stairs of the Workers' Club were 'covered with the blood of the Storm Troopers as the men boldly defended themselves with anything that could be found to throw at them'. Bloor perceived this as evidence of Nazi organisation in the USA and linked it to the actions of the US government which she believed was 'preparing to terrorise workers, in case of war'.<sup>36</sup>

It is also necessary to briefly mention the other Soviet women who were involved in correspondence with representatives of the CMF. One, Maria Krylova, was closely involved in maintaining a link between the Soviet Union and the CMF. Despite her role in the international communist apparatus, not much is known about Krylova. She worked in the cadre department of the Executive Committee of the Comintern from 1932 to 1938 and worked closely with Dimitrov, featuring in entries in his journal on occasion.<sup>37</sup> Cattaneo wrote lengthy, amiable letters to Krylova: she spoke of the success of the committee's work in Spain, particularly the 'extensive effort' of the French and Belgian committees in collecting 'thousands of kilos of goods, clothes, provisions, and sanitary materials' which had been sent to Spain each week for some months. Cattaneo closed the letter on friendly terms, demonstrating the close friendship between the two women:

'I hope to be able to take a few days off at the end of January and will gladly spend them with you, as you invited me. Our best wishes to Hélène [Stasova], to Kir, and to all our friends. See you soon, I hope. I kiss you with all my heart.'<sup>38</sup>

Another letter to Krylova written by Cattaneo also demonstrated a close relationship that went beyond CMF business:

'Write me so quickly. Give us news of Hélène [Stasova] to whom we all wish with all our hearts a speedy recovery. Kisses to [your] toddlers, who must be so good at the age when they start walking alone and try to speak.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, p. 82, 83 and 99.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Bernadette Cattaneo to Maria Krylova (21.12.1936), Pandor, 543\_2\_14, Doc. 133.

All of your friends have charged me to give you their best wishes and I kiss you lovingly.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, when Krylova wrote to Cattaneo, she wrote not only of CMF issues, but also of her family life; she informed Cattaneo on 31 January 1939 that 'our family has again expanded. I have a new granddaughter, Marie, Dima's sister, a sweet little girl of six weeks.'<sup>40</sup> These letters demonstrated that relationships between CMF women and Soviet representatives went beyond that of colleagues; they were often close friends who could speak candidly to one another, and this must also have impacted how Soviet women advised on CMF business.

The letters mentioned here are not the only examples of correspondence between the Soviet Union and the CMF; there are hundreds of similar letters in the CMF archives which contain CMF business juxtaposed alongside friendly conversations. These letters to female Soviet political activists are important because they demonstrate a tangible link between CMF women and the Comintern; they show a level of influence exerted over the committee by Soviet representatives, which was manifested through friendly requests for advice by CMF women and by a constant stream of information on committee work from the group's leadership to the USSR. As far as we can see from the archival material, the CMF was never given orders to follow in these letters, but Soviet women did represent authority for the CMF leadership and shared their extensive experience in international political organisation with CMF women, acting as intermediaries between the CMF and the Comintern. The amiable tone of the letters was indicative of the close collaboration between the women, which facilitated easier discussion of issues facing the committees.

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from Bernadette Cattaneo to Maria Krylova (19.02.1938), Pandor, 543\_2\_29, Doc. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Maria Krylova to Bernadette Cattaneo (31.01.1939), Pandor, 543\_2\_29, Doc. 91.



## CMF Women in the Soviet Union

Paul Hollander has argued that the Marxist conception of society gave Western intellectuals 'an impressively coherent explanation of all the disturbing phenomena of the time: the Depression, unemployment, poverty, and the rise of Nazism'.<sup>41</sup> These political and social crises highlighted the 'contradictions of capitalism' and many visitors flocked to the Soviet Union as they 'succeeded in projecting the image of being the only staunch and determined opponents of Nazism and fascism', which seemed to be lacking in the democratic European nations.<sup>42</sup> There was a concerted effort by the CMF leadership and the Comintern to harness this interest in the Soviet Union through delegations that visited the country to experience communist society first-hand. The French, Belgian, and Swiss sections of the CMF all visited the USSR with delegations composed primarily of working-class women, sometimes jointly with CMF women from other countries. Visits like these reflected the trend of 'political tourism' to different societies in the interwar period, be they communist or fascist, which allowed women to maintain international contacts and imagine themselves 'as part of something larger than the nation...dedicated to common goals of social transformation'.<sup>43</sup> They were also useful propaganda tools and provided a way for the Comintern to identify women who could be potentially receptive to communist ideas who were not members of the communist party. The propaganda aspect was twofold. First, the publicity generated by the visit of a large group of western women to the Soviet Union could be used to present the country in a positive manner in the western press. Second, the women themselves often wrote about their time in the 'socialist utopia' once they had returned home, which had been so heavily controlled by the Soviet government that it was unlikely that there would be much negative to report

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<sup>41</sup> Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp. 77 and 79.

<sup>43</sup> Joan Sangster, 'Political Tourism, Writing, and Communication: Transnational Connections of Women on the Left, 1920s – 1930s', in Johnson et al. (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Women's Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s*, p. 114.

on. This section will examine the visit of one delegation of CMF women in detail, to understand how these visits were structured and what their goals were in visiting the new 'socialist utopia'.

In 1935, a delegation of 48 French and Belgian women were invited to visit the Soviet Union to observe the changes made to society under Bolshevik control.<sup>44</sup> The group included women from different political, social, and cultural backgrounds who were united through their work in the CMF. These women did not hold leadership positions in the committee; rather they were the teachers, medical professionals, relatives of prominent French and Belgian intellectuals, and workers engaged in trade union work who made up the rank-and-file, some of whom did not identify themselves politically, while others belonged to non-communist left-wing parties.<sup>45</sup> Their itinerary started and ended in Moscow with trips to other Soviet states in between, broadly following the same itineraries as those which were created by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), a body which was designed to control what foreign visitors to the USSR were exposed to. CMF delegates visited Kharkov, Rostov-on-Don, Baku, Mineralnye Vody, Sochi, Ivanovo, the Bolshevo prison commune, Moscow, and Leningrad, as well as several smaller towns and villages during their journey. They also visited several Soviet institutions, including schools, factories, prison communes and kolkhozes.<sup>46</sup> Women embarking on such long, politically motivated trips were not the norm in this period. However, it can be argued that women who went to the USSR were usually defined more by their class than their gender, because 'they were either financially independent intellectuals for whom travel was already a habit, or they were worker delegates whose presence in

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<sup>44</sup> 'Pour l'égalité des droits : les femmes belges rentrent de Russie, rapport de leur mission', *Le Peuple* (18.09.1935), p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> 'Caractéristiques des membres de la délégation française du comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme' (20.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_6, Doc. 10, p.1.

<sup>46</sup> Kershaw, 'French and British Female Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: The Journey to the USSR 1929 – 1942', p. 14; Letter from Yvonne Carré to Claudia Kirsanova (20.7.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_8, Doc. 24.

Soviet Russia was justified by their proletarian identity and communist commitment'.<sup>47</sup>

The CMF delegates on this trip fit into three main categories: intellectuals who would usually be unable to afford such a lengthy trip without the aid of the Comintern, workers defined by this 'proletarian identity', and women who were committed to the communist cause, as well as women who fit into multiple categories.

While class issues were certainly important for the Franco-Belgian CMF delegation, many of the women were particularly concerned with observing first-hand how the Soviet Union had made moves towards women's emancipation. The purpose of their month-long journey was 'to study the construction of socialism, the living conditions of manual workers and intellectuals, and particularly the place given to women and children' in this new society.<sup>48</sup> The delegates chronicled their visit in short articles and a longer 'open letter to women around the world', which covered their journey from the 'North to the South' of the USSR. They visited 'the countryside, towns, capitals of Republics and national districts, spas and seaside resorts', in which they toured 'huge new or reconstructed factories, oil wells and refineries, tobacco factories, a dairy factory, a bread factory [and] collective farms (kolkhozes)'. The delegates also visited a number of social institutions, including crèches and kindergartens full of 'beautiful, clean and chubby babies', schools, libraries and sports clubs.

The women were particularly struck by the efforts made by the Soviet government to emancipate the women in its Muslim republics, who French delegate Virginie Mazer-Garnier described as 'lamentable'.<sup>49</sup> In Baku, they met a Muslim woman who was president of a local Soviet and elsewhere in Azerbaijan they met female factory and cooperative directors, trade union presidents, engineers and

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<sup>47</sup> Kershaw, 'French and British Female Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: The Journey to the USSR 1929 – 1942', p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> 'Lettre ouverte aux femmes du monde entier', Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Virginie Mazer-Garnier, 'Émancipation de la Femme Turque', Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 40.

builders. For the CMF delegates, women's emancipation as they had witnessed in the Soviet Union was something they hoped they could replicate in their own countries, but they believed it 'could only be achieved by a workers 'and peasants' government'.<sup>50</sup> Madeleine Giroux, a French socialist who was 'active in the women's movement', spoke of the progress made by the USSR towards women's emancipation, when only 20 years earlier the experience of Soviet women was 'worse than [that of] a slave'. Giroux wrote that the delegation had taken note of the 'enthusiasm of the women participating in the work of socialist construction' everywhere they visited.<sup>51</sup>

However, some of the most historically useful material from the trip was generated on the last night of the delegation's visit. In contrast to the 'open letter to women around the world', a work of propaganda which was published in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, the delegates gave speeches to their hosts which presented their feelings towards the USSR. Each speech covered a few key points: they gave thanks to their hosts and tour guides, showed a general appreciation for what they had seen, and praised the Soviet government for the successful construction of a socialist state. However, each woman also spoke of how the visit had affected them personally. Émilienne Steux, a young Belgian socialist, was impacted by the reaction that the delegation had received from the Soviet people:

'what we will remember is the warm welcome we received, not only from activists, because that is not what has value for us, but in the factories, in the rest homes, workers who took us into their home and who told us: "Tell the truth at home, what you saw, what you know about our lives."' <sup>52</sup>

Many of the delegates expressed an admiration for the USSR's achievements, while also demonstrating a deep respect for the Soviet people that they had met. One Belgian delegate said that 'when we return to Belgium... when I evoke our beautiful

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<sup>50</sup> 'Lettre ouverte aux femmes du monde entier', Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 1.

<sup>51</sup> 'Speech made by Madeleine Giroux' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 24.

<sup>52</sup> 'Speech made by Émilienne Steux' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 8.

journey through the USSR, what I will see will be bright eyes, happy eyes.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Giroux wrote that 'we do not know what to admire the most; we do not know whether we should admire the achievements [of the USSR] or the mystical enthusiasm that drives the people the most'.<sup>54</sup>

The 'enthusiasm' of the Soviet working-class was often contrasted with the situation faced by the working class in France and Belgium. Steux emphasised that the delegation would adopt the Soviet sense of 'enthusiasm which lifts the people', which was a 'working class psychology' that was not present in their own countries.<sup>55</sup> Having witnessed socialism in action in the kolkhozes, communal kitchens and crèches, the women were inspired to reinvigorate their work among women and the working-class at home. Madeleine Langevin, the daughter of the prominent physicist and member of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, Paul Langevin, was also a delegate on this trip and was one of the women most determined to use what she had seen on the journey to inform her work in France. She told those present at the final evening of their visit that

'What better propaganda argument can we have than all we have seen?... What better example for propaganda on... peace can be given than the great example of internationalism that we have seen here?

... What comparison will better draw women to anti-fascism than the comparison between the existence of women [in the USSR], of all that has been created for her, of all the possibilities of ascension to a more beautiful life, and the state of women in fascist countries, for whom every hour is a regression?

... And finally, we do not have a better incentive to get back to work, than to have seen the energy and the great faith in socialism and its achievements that we have experienced.

We return home with the conviction that soon, we will succeed in achieving the emancipation of women and work for the realisation of a broader united front than we have already partly achieved.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 'Speech made at final meeting of CMF women in Soviet Union' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 18.

<sup>54</sup> 'Speech made by Madeleine Giroux' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 24.

<sup>55</sup> 'Speech made by Émilienne Steux' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 8.

<sup>56</sup> 'Speech made by Madeleine Langevin' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 29.



Even women who were sceptical about the achievements of the Soviet Union gave credit to the country for certain aspects of life there and positively contrasted it to the situation in their own countries. Marie Guillot, a Parisian teacher who was active in the women's movement, was interested in the Soviet approach to childcare and praised a crèche in Ivanovo which allowed mothers to work in a nearby factory in 'tranquillity', knowing that they would find their 'dear little darling' smiling at the end of the day. She said that she could not speak on everything, but she 'felt a deep sense of admiration for all the magnificent achievements accomplished in the Soviet Union', particularly towards efforts to improve the lives of mothers and children.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Claire Baril, a French socialist who lived in Belgium and who was initially sceptical of Soviet claims, acknowledged that what they had seen had 'left an indelible impression' on her. She appreciated the Soviet approach to public health, which specifically interested her. She said:

'Here we see an effort so formidable, intelligent, [and] enthusiastic that we can view it like this: in the Soviet Union, they manage to make life even with death.

...we will return [home] armed with a new courage to realise proletarian unity, in order to fight victoriously against fascism and against war, and for the realisation of socialism.'<sup>62</sup>

There is little to suggest that the CMF delegates were aware that the Soviet government used 'perceptual filters' to control their experience in the country.<sup>63</sup> Some delegates, including Claire Baril, were aware that their freedom in the Soviet Union was restricted; Baril consistently qualified that the delegates did not 'pretend to have seen everything and understood everything', and as such she was unable to make a judgement about the USSR as a whole.<sup>64</sup> However, they did not seem to realise that their itineraries had been carefully planned and adhered to. Ludmilla Stern has

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<sup>61</sup> 'Speech made by Marie Guillot' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 31.

<sup>62</sup> 'Speech made by Claire Baril' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Kershaw, 'French and British Female Intellectuals and the Soviet Union: The Journey to the USSR 1929 – 1942,' p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> 'Speech made by Claire Baril' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 31.

labelled some of VOKS's assumptions about the preferences of their visitors as 'misguided', as 'visitors complained of both excessive organisation ('I am used to doing as I please, and here they don't let me') and insufficient organisation' on days when visitors were not taken anywhere.<sup>65</sup> Using itineraries to control what visitors saw during their time in the Soviet Union was common on all visits there, as strictly organising what visitors did allowed the Soviet government to control the narrative surrounding their country in the outside world. For example, a VOKS memorandum warned Soviet institutions whose experts interacted with foreigners that 'their questions were often so politically sensitive' that the answer could 'have serious consequences for the further relations of foreigners to the USSR', and thus must be approached with the utmost caution.<sup>66</sup> Sylvia Margulies has argued that 'Soviet authorities showed the best that they had and urged their guests to generalise from those unrepresentative conditions', using the best hotels, trains, and guides who gave 'tourists the illusion of freedom in their travels despite tight framing'.<sup>67</sup>

The CMF visit was also beneficial for the Soviet Union for two reasons. First, the CMF delegates generated propaganda for the Soviet Union, either intentionally or otherwise, which could encourage socialist women to take a closer interest in the country. CMF journals published several articles which chronicled the delegation's experiences in the USSR. French chemistry professors Madames Ponteuil and Mazurier wrote an article about the 'magnificent achievements' of the Soviet Union in public health, while Valentine Lacoste, a French trade unionist and anti-war protester, wrote of the 'transformation of Baku' in 'only ... 15 years of Soviet administration' through the 'well perfected' exploitation of oil.<sup>68</sup> Yvonne Damon praised the Soviet

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<sup>65</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920 – 40*, p. 125.

<sup>66</sup> Fox, 'The Fellow Travellers Revisited: The 'Cultured West' through Soviet Eyes', p. 313.

<sup>67</sup> Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937*, p. 148; Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route: entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 197.

<sup>68</sup> 'Pourquoi et comment nous sommes venues en URSS', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (November - December 1935), p. 6.



people: 'Moreover, this is what strikes all travellers to the USSR: the naturalness and serenity... of the strength of those who have tasks to fulfil.'<sup>69</sup>

The French and Belgian sections both arranged meetings in their respective countries on their return to educate their comrades in the CMF on what they had observed. Belgian women held a meeting on 17 September 1935 in Brussels on the 'equality of rights' of women and children, in which the delegates propagandised Soviet legislation on the protection of maternity and infancy and highlighted the work of married women, maternity leave, abortion, and medical enquiries into women and children's health as examples of women's emancipation. They told the meeting that 'economically, legally, and politically', they could not 'tell the differences between men and women' in the Soviet Union. They claimed that their socialist feminism had been 'flattered' by the presence of female factory directors and secretaries of local communist party sections and trade unions. In addition, they spoke about the social problems which were apparently being successfully tackled by the Soviet government, as 'alcoholism was in regression... [and] the struggle against prostitution has been undertaken with vigour'.<sup>70</sup>

The delegates were most complimentary about the Soviet people, however. Steux recounted how happy she had been to be in contact with 'the Russian proletariat' who had 'suffered so much but who today know victory'. Sirène Blicck spoke with 'humour and vigour' about the equality in work that she had witnessed, which proved to be a 'real success' among the audience at the meeting. The main goal of this Belgian meeting was to spread positive propaganda about the Soviet Union among women in their home countries; Claire Baril, who was one of the most sceptical delegates, even excused herself for the fact that her speech was not entirely positive about the USSR's achievements.<sup>71</sup> This was an indispensable source of

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<sup>69</sup> Yvonne Damon, 'Tourisme prolétarien', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (November – December 1935), p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> 'Pour l'égalité des droits : les femmes belges rentrent de Russie, rapport de leur mission', p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

propaganda for the Soviet Union, as the glowing endorsement of western socialists could encourage potentially hostile women to support the Soviet Union. It also legitimised the USSR in the eyes of Western intellectuals more generally.

The second way that CMF delegations to the USSR were beneficial for the country itself was that it allowed the Comintern to observe members of the CMF and to rate their level of susceptibility to Soviet propaganda. For this purpose, the Soviet guides who accompanied the delegation generated short reports on each woman which included their employment, place of residency, political affiliation, and any defining personality traits which had been exposed during the visit. Similar to the VOKS reports on foreign visitors in the interwar period, there was an 'explicit rating of the seriousness, expertise, and level of cultivation of the person under scrutiny'.<sup>72</sup> Another similarity with the VOKS reports was the conclusions they made about the visitor's stance toward the Soviet Union which could help to ascertain if the individual was likely to cooperate with communists in the future.<sup>73</sup> Copies of these reports are held in the CMF papers, but it is unclear if they were held anywhere else. Who the reports were definitively created for is unknown; beyond being used by the Comintern, we cannot make conclusions on who exactly received these reports. However, because of the similarities with VOKS reports, it would not be unreasonable to assume that they were created for use by VOKS or another similar agency.

The reports on CMF delegates are illuminating because they include the occupations of women who were not, in most cases, prominent activists. Eight of the delegates were teachers, seven were involved with trade unions or reformist organisations, and five were authors or journalists. Several women who were identified as teachers were not described in glowing terms; the French communist teacher Camille Ringard was described as 'lazy', 'violent', and as not taking an 'active

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<sup>72</sup> Fox, 'The Fellow Travellers Revisited: The 'Cultured West' through Soviet Eyes', p. 309.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 311.

part' in the delegation's work, while Suzanne Pinot was identified as 'passive and politically weak'. The reports also contained some random observations. Yvonne Canya was described as 'unstable' and as having an 'undisciplined attitude', while Madeleine Giroux was noted for distancing herself from the other delegates because she was 'nervous'. As a result, Giroux was often absent when the delegation discussed 'important questions'. A surprising anecdote from the reports regarded Eugénie Peniakova-Querstens, a Russian socialist who was married to a Belgian man, who was noted for her 'bold and hostile character', which apparently indisposed the entire delegation against her. The report claimed that, while in Moscow, 'no-one wanted to sleep in the same room with her'. Her attitude and her role in the POB marked her out for special observation by the communists in the CMF after the delegates had returned home.<sup>74</sup>

These reports also add context to the speeches given by the delegates on their last night in the USSR. As the reports rate the susceptibility of each woman towards Soviet ideals, it can help to provide context on why some non-communist women praised the achievements of the Soviet Union and how their perceptions of the socialist state developed over the course of their visit. The most surprising speech of the evening was that of Jeanne Beaufeise, who went out of her way to advocate a Soviet style government in France and directly praise Stalin:

'To our comrade and great friend Hélène Stasova, to all her collaborators, to all the women of the USSR, we swear that, even at the price of our blood, we will know to defend our freedom; we do not want fascism. And I think that the time may not be far when France and the Soviet Union will walk hand in hand in the shadow of the Red Flag as the sun rises over humanity.

I end with saluting your beautiful country.

Long live your head [of state], your great head Stalin!

Long live the USSR! Long live peace, down with fascism!'<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> 'Caractéristiques des membres de la délégation française du Comité international des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme/Caractéristiques des membres de la délégation antifasciste franco-belge des femmes', Pandor, 543\_2\_6, Docs. 10 and 17.

<sup>75</sup> 'Speech made by Jeanne Beaufeise' (04.09.1935), Pandor, 543\_2\_5, Doc. 13.

This statement went far beyond what the other women had said in their speeches; although they were complimentary about the Soviet Union and its achievements, no one else mentioned Stalin and no-one outright advocated a communist government in France, even the communist members of the delegation. The report on Beaufeise emphasised how Soviet control of the CMF visit had had a real impact on the women's opinions on Soviet society. She was identified because, despite her 'advanced age', she had taken an active role in the delegation by speaking in Baku, Ivanovo and Moscow. The sentiments expressed by Beaufeise in the speech on the final night of the visit were surprising because Beaufeise had been a member of the SFIO for more than 20 years. However, this visit to the Soviet Union had radically changed her political sympathies. The report noted her deep 'love and enthusiasm for the USSR and for Soviet comrades' which had encouraged her to think about leaving the SFIO for the PCF. However, the report was also clear that Beaufeise's current role as a socialist could provide opportunities for communists to 'intervene often' in French socialist business.<sup>76</sup>

The purpose of these visits was primarily propagandistic, but they were also a way for the Comintern to be intimately involved in the CMF through the reports compiled on each delegate; it allowed the Comintern to observe each woman and assess their level of commitment to both the anti-fascist cause and the Soviet Union, identifying who would be most useful in political work in the future. This visit was successful for both the CMF and the Comintern on almost all fronts: many of the socialists were deeply impressed by their experience in the Soviet Union, and at least one, Jeanne Beaufeise, seriously considered leaving the SFIO for the PCF. Visits like these (of which there were a few during the early years of the CMF, most of which generated significantly less documentation than this one) were indispensable for

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<sup>76</sup> 'Caractéristiques des membres de la délégation française du Comité international des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Pandor, 543\_2\_6, Doc. 10, p. 2.

creating a positive perception of the country in the west. In addition, they allowed the CMF to demonstrate that they held close links with the Soviet Union, without admitting that the Comintern had any level of control or influence over the committee. Further, they solidified the relationship between the CMF and the USSR by allowing the rank-and-file members of the CMF to engage with ordinary Soviet people.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen in the first chapter, the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement was an early example of Popular Front strategy before it was the official policy of the Comintern, reflecting developments in the PCF which increasingly favoured collaboration with the SFIO. However, it has also been argued in this chapter that the very stimulus for the adoption of a Popular Front strategy largely originated in France and the PCF, in part from their responses to the riots of 6 February 1934. This chapter has explored the political situation for French and international communists immediately preceding the founding CMF congress in August 1934 and during its early years, to provide context to the relationship between CMF women and both Soviet women and communist internationalists.

The CMF held links with the Comintern and the Soviet Union by extension at least until the group moved its centre from Paris to London in 1939, and likely even beyond then. CMF women and women not officially engaged in CMF work used the committee to correspond with Soviet women in the Comintern. Elena Stasova was the most popular Soviet correspondent, but other women involved in the Comintern apparatus were also involved in correspondences that discussed CMF business. It is also pertinent to mention that these correspondences were not strictly business; Bernadette Cattaneo was personally close to both Stasova and Maria Krylova which could have impacted how Soviet influence was exercised over CMF proceedings. In addition, the committee organised several visits to the Soviet Union for some of its

rank-and-file members, which were acts of propaganda intended to positively portray life in the Soviet Union and to demonstrate that the CMF was intimately involved in international politics. The visits were also attempts at conversion, however, as these trips (as with other visits made by westerners in the interwar period) were used to convince visitors to support the Soviet Union and potentially even convert to communism.

This chapter has shown that there is no obvious evidence that the CMF was under the total control of the Comintern; in comparison to earlier communist front organisations and the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, the CMF had a certain level of freedom in its work. It was still undoubtedly a communist front organisation, as the fact that the CMF papers are held in the Comintern archives demonstrates. However, in terms of its organisation and its day-to-day concerns, the CMF operated alone. Certainly, the CMF held objectives that centred on the promotion of the Soviet Union and communist ideals, but the relationship between CMF women and the Cominternians seems to have been based largely on mutual respect and requests for advice, rather than through any sort of obligation to the international communist apparatus. The relationship between Comintern members and the CMF manifested itself largely through influence and suggestion, rather than through direct control.

## Chapter Five

### **The Campaigns of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme***

The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* committed itself to extensive campaigning on how fascism impacted the lives of women and children across the globe. It took an interest in fascist involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Japanese aggression in China, and Nazi treatment of women in Germany. Much of this work was publicised in the CMF journals, *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, to raise consciousness amongst their members about the impact of conflict on their sisters in other countries. In addition, CMF women visited Spain, China, and Germany to observe the problems facing women and children in these countries, generating reports on what they experienced.

Utilising these reports, this chapter will examine how the CMF organised international campaigns against fascism and militarism in the latter half of the 1930s, with a focus on the impact on women. Further work on the CMF could examine the methods used by the committee to campaign against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The CMF did protest the invasion, but it generated far less in the way of documentation than the three campaigns featured in this chapter. These campaigns demonstrate well how the CMF used language and image to publicise their campaigns. First, the organisation used its Spanish Civil War campaign to establish a dichotomy which positioned the women effected as either *mujeres* (women, mothers, wives) or *milicianas* (female Republican fighters). The CMF's German campaign also utilised a maternalist image of German women to encourage them to use their position within the family to challenge Nazi policies which negatively impacted women. German women who actively challenged the injustices perpetrated by their government also gained the attention of the CMF; female anti-fascist fighters, like Liselotte Herrmann, were elevated as the ideal image of an emancipated woman

by the communists in the organisation. The CMF was also captivated by the plight of Chinese women and children who suffered under Japanese imperial aggression, but, for the first time, it was the impact of war on children specifically that was the focus of the campaign. Through the testimony of CMF members who had visited China during the war, including British communist and journalist Charlotte Haldane, the CMF launched aid campaigns to support children who had been made orphans during the conflict. The CMF's contribution to the Chinese aid campaign allowed the organisation to diversify its methods of campaigning, employing innovative ways to encourage its membership to support those affected by fascism and war that went beyond the CMF's standard fundraising and publicising. This chapter will particularly emphasise the different types of language used by the group to stimulate a feeling of unity and sisterhood between its members and the targets of their campaigns; maternalist language that stressed the commonality of motherhood as a means of creating empathy and a desire to act and violent language that evoked emotional responses will be highlighted.

### ***Mujeres and Milicianas: The Spanish Civil War Campaign***

The Spanish Civil War was a unique event in world history because it galvanised people on opposite sides of the political spectrum like no other event in the interwar period. The war, fought between the Republican Popular Front government on the one hand and General Francisco Franco's fascist rebel forces on the other, became the first major battleground between the two new ideologies of the twentieth century, communism and fascism. The Nazi government, keen to test the new weaponry it had developed, and the Italian fascist government under Mussolini deployed troops and channelled funding to Franco's rebels, allowing them to aid the growth of another fascist state and to strengthen their own position in Europe. It also served as a warning about the strength of the Nazi state to the rest of Europe. On the other hand,



the Soviet Union used fascist involvement in the Civil War as an excuse to pump resources into Spain to aid the Republican cause. Furthermore, democratic nations in Europe committed themselves to a policy of non-intervention, which 'politicised humanitarian relief as the Republic's besieged cities of Madrid, Bilbao, and Barcelona became symbols for the policy's failure'.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Civil War became a major ideological battleground which galvanised left-wing activists across Europe; the Spanish Civil War, 'with its mixture of heroism and cynicism, selfless solidarity and murderous terror' stimulated an activist 'internationalism perfected and perverted as never before'.<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish Civil War also galvanised women in several ways. Aid Spain campaigns successfully targeted women by using images and personal stories which amplified the horrors faced by women and children living in areas of conflict. As the war progressed, it became clear that the rights that Spanish women had gained in the period after the First World War were slowly being eroded in the territories under Franco's control. For example, non-religious marriages were annulled and by 1939 the divorce law was repealed in its entirety, with all divorces 'declared null and void'. A woman's right to hold a separate nationality from her husband was revoked and the right to legalised abortion was rescinded. Franco also promised to 'liberate married women from the workshop and factory' by removing their right to work, a notion which greatly concerned activist women, including those in the CMF.<sup>3</sup>

Women played a major role in the campaigns to aid Spain through the use of rhetoric and speech; some activist leaders thought that women were 'less refined

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Brown, "'Pour Aider Nos Freres d'Espagne': Humanitarian Aid, French Women, and Popular Mobilisation during the Front Populaire', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2007), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Internationalism: A Breviary', *New Left Review*, Vol. 14 (2002), p. 15; For further reading on the Spanish Civil War, see George R. Esenwein, *The Spanish Civil War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lewis H. Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left: Political Activism and the Popular Front* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007) and Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilisation: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver: Arden Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Julia Biggane, 'The Rewards of Female Fascism in Franco's New State: The *Recompensas Y* of the *Sección Femenina de la Falange*, 1939–1945', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Vol. 90, No. 8 (2013), p. 1335.

public speakers than males and were therefore better able to speak from the heart to describe emotions or private suffering', which, they believed, would encourage more people to act.<sup>4</sup> CMF campaigns represented a concern about the suffering of Spanish civilians which was characterised by 'both a gendered and a political resonance', which utilised the 'maternalist image of women as social protectors' in conjunction with explicitly socialist language.<sup>5</sup> In both Britain and Belgium, CMF women had worked in a number of cross-party initiatives for Spain; for example, Ellen Wilkinson, the British Labour MP and CMF contributor, visited Spain on "at least six occasions in the 1930s", including once with an all-female parliamentary committee which Labour politician Geoffrey Theodore Garratt labelled the 'monstrous Regiment of Women'.<sup>6</sup> According to Matt Perry, this committee truly 'encapsulated the efforts of Münzenberg... to implement the Popular Front strategy of the outstretched hand to 'progressive sections of the capitalist class' in anti-fascist campaigning', as Wilkinson was encouraged by him to visit Spain with female politicians who represented a diverse portion of the British political party system.<sup>7</sup>

However, it was Elena Stasova who first suggested that Wilkinson investigated the worsening situation in Spain in the aftermath of the Asturian miners' insurrection which occurred in October 1934, shortly after the first CMF congress and before the outbreak of the Civil War. Wilkinson initially went to Spain to publicise the 'truth' about the conflict, but also saw an opportunity in her first visit to 'strengthen Spain's anti-fascist networks' and bring them closer to the already formed Amsterdam-Pleyel movement.<sup>8</sup> It was the miners' uprising which demonstrated to Wilkinson that only the unity of the workers could stop 'the sweep of fascism across the continent'. However, her experience of the Civil War as a whole would lead her to

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, "Pour Aider Nos Frères d'Espagne", p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, p. 301; Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 298.

question her faith in the unity of the workers and their ability to 'throw off the yoke of fascism without resort to another world war'.<sup>9</sup> Her trips to visit Spain affected her on a deeply personal level; her clearest memory was 'the feeling of helpless choking rage as the shells fell, dealing death with their blind, stupid powers.' Wilkinson also expressed the belief that the conflict was a clear-cut ideological struggle: 'Do you really expect us to go to Spain and return impartial? No longer is it a civil war, it is a fight between right and wrong.'<sup>10</sup>

In an article discussing the contribution of French women to Spanish aid campaigns, Laurence Brown used a phrase deployed by the CMF: '*Pour aider nos frères d'Espagne*'. This slogan was used in a fundraiser poster exhibition held by the Villejuif committee which depicted Spanish women as both victims and active participants in the war. Brown points out that the word '*frères*' 'deliberately drew on an older language of proletarian brotherhood and Socialist solidarity'.<sup>11</sup> However, Sue Bruley has argued that communist women were generally less concerned with party affiliation and language than their male counterparts and 'devoted far more time and energy to relief work than to political propaganda', which meant that the 'humanitarian, rather than the political aspect, was always in the forefront'.<sup>12</sup> The CMF's work regarding Spain is a good example of this, as it tended to appeal to the maternal potential of women, rather than using political language to attract them to the cause. CMF journals carried articles which emphasised the suffering of women and children in territories under the control of Franco, but women's active roles in the conflict were not neglected; the CMF made it clear that all Spanish women were 'working in some way, some are making garments for the militia, some spend their days nursing the wounded or running homes for child refugees'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, p. 302 – 303; Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 330.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, "Pour Aider Nos Frères d'Espagne", p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920-1939*, p. 282.

<sup>13</sup> Magda Gellan, 'The Women's Front in Spain', *Woman To-day* (November 1936), p. 5.

CMF journals used the Spanish word for women, *mujeres*, to refer to women who played traditionally feminine roles in the war effort, particularly Spanish mothers. *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, the journal of the French section of the CMF, and *Woman To-day*, the journal of the British section, emphasised the suffering of *mujeres* and their children in their pages to appeal for action from its membership. The journals carried articles from women who had visited Spain and witnessed the carnage first-hand; Leah Manning, a British former Labour MP and the Secretary of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, gave an interview to *Woman To-day* in which she related her experiences in Madrid just before the battle for the city on 6 November 1936. Manning explained how, on the morning of a bombing raid, women and children had 'set out quite early to take their stand in the food queues' which fascist planes flew over, 'so that they could launch their murderous assault with machine and bomb. One hundred-and-twenty-seven mangled and bleeding bodies were there in this one queue when the raid was over'. Manning emphasised that she saw the bombing as a premeditated attack on the women and children of Madrid by the fascists, a conviction which was deepened further by her visit to the city morgue where, 'on the cold slabs of death, [she] saw the crushed and mutilated bodies of baby victims of Fascism.' As she was so disgusted by the violent deaths of these children, she 'was too overcome... to penetrate further into the Morgue and see the bodies of the women who had given these babies life.'<sup>14</sup> Manning appealed to the assumed maternal instincts of her readers to draw them into the aid effort; by using emotive adjectives and emphasising the feelings she experienced, Manning was reinforcing the idea that women's 'solidarity was built on emotional bonds that stretched across boundaries'.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Manning related the experiences of a friend, which also utilised graphic language to demonstrate the horror of the conflict:

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<sup>14</sup> Leah Manning, 'Bombs on Madrid', *Woman To-day* (January – February 1937), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Roseanna Webster, 'A Spanish Housewife is Your Next-Door Neighbour': British Women and the Spanish Civil War', *Gender and History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2015), p. 410.

‘A friend of mine told me later that the sight which most moved him on that dreadful day was that of a lovely baby girl, she couldn’t have been more than two years old, who had her right arm severed by a piece of bomb casing, and who, although dying, was making weak and futile efforts with her left hand and arm to reach her doll, which had fallen beyond her reach. That baby died soon afterwards from her frightful wounds.’<sup>16</sup>

A similarly distressing experience was related in a letter from Carmel Haden-Guest to *Woman To-day*, about a visit that she made to the refugees of Malaga; she wrote of ‘a little girl of twelve years whose parents have been killed, [who] has lost her power of speech and can only babble incoherently’, and of a mother who looked around ‘dumbly’ for her deceased children ‘as though she were still searching for them and listening for their voices’ while holding her only living child. Haden-Guest communicated the sense of fear which came with the fascist advance effectively, as she described how some mothers had attempted to force their children into overladen vehicles to escape the fascist terror, but one young mother had, in despair, laid under a tree and ‘killed her baby and cut her own throat’.<sup>17</sup>

Ellen Wilkinson often made humanitarian appeals for aid to Spain, using her role in the Labour Party to publicise her experiences; she argued that, as Britain would not send arms to Republican forces because of the British government’s policy of neutrality, the sending of food was crucial, as the fight would ‘ultimately [be] won or lost on the stomachs of the women and children’.<sup>18</sup> Adopting this concept, the CMF encouraged British women to make pull-overs, scarves and cardigans, ‘to send bandages to the medical aid committee’, and to generally ‘rouse sympathy among [their] friends so that they too will aid those who are fighting heroically in the cause of humanity and progress’.<sup>19</sup> One CMF appeal, signed by seventeen prominent British women, including activists, philanthropists, novelists and lawyers, called for ‘Food,

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<sup>16</sup> Leah Manning, ‘Bombs on Madrid’, *Woman To-day* (January – February 1937), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Carmel Haden-Guest, ‘Victims of Malaga’, *Woman To-day* (April 1937), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Perry, ‘*Red Ellen*’ Wilkinson, p. 326.

<sup>19</sup> Magda Gellan, ‘The Women’s Front in Spain’, *Woman To-day* (November 1936), p. 5.

Milk, Clothes and Money for Spain'.<sup>20</sup> The appeal argued that as 'democratic British citizens... as mothers and parents... as friends of freedom', women had the 'task of aiding the Spanish people in their fight'. Specifically, the appeal focused on milk for Spanish infants; in Bilbao in particular, food was scarce, and milk stocks were extremely low which put children at a real risk of starvation. The appeal was intended to encourage all women to contribute what they could, but mothers were specifically targeted: 'See to it that there is no baby suffering in Spain through a milk shortage. Let your love of childhood and freedom, your warm affection for all that is best in society see that woman responds to woman, by assisting with this appeal.'<sup>21</sup>

This kind of maternalism was a common theme in feminism in the first half of the twentieth century, as many women's peace organisations argued that women had a natural 'disposition' towards caregiving and thus were best suited for peace work.<sup>22</sup> It stressed women's 'maternal, domestic role, deriving from it a series of values seen as lacking in male-dominated public life' and promoted notions of gender difference.<sup>23</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor has defined maternalists as believing

'1. that there was a uniquely feminine value system based on care and nurturance, 2. that mothers performed a service to the state by raising citizen workers, 3. that women were united across class, race, and nation by their common capacity for motherhood... and 4. that ideally men should earn a family wage to support their 'dependent' wives and children at home'.<sup>24</sup>

The CMF utilised some aspects of maternalist rhetoric in their campaigns and propaganda, but they were not a maternalist organisation by this definition; the committee still stressed the importance of economic independence for women and

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<sup>20</sup> These women were: Margaret Corbett Ashby, Katharine Atholl, Vera Brittain, Elizabeth Cadbury, Stella Churchill, Dorothy Gladstone, B. Anne Godwin, Barbara Duncan Harris, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Flora Robson, Virginia Woolf, Margery Fry, Helen Darbishire, L. Susan Stebbing, Elizabeth M. Jebb, Eva M. Hubback.

<sup>21</sup> 'Food, Milk, Clothes and Money for Spain', *Woman To-day* (March 1937), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion between historians of what 'maternalism' means in different contexts, see 'Maternalism as a Paradigm', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1993), pp. 95 – 130.

<sup>23</sup> Naomi Black, 'The Mothers' International: The Women's Co-Operative Guild and Feminist Pacifism', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (1984), p. 467.

<sup>24</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, 'Toward Defining Maternalism in U.S. History', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1993), p. 110.

actively encouraged them to participate in the workforce while utilising traditional images of women to engage with its audience. In the Spanish campaign, women were constantly addressed as mothers and persuaded that they had to fight fascism to 'protect their children'. In the Spanish CMF journal, *Mujeres*, motherhood was invoked as a facet of women's 'collective identity', but it was also presented in militaristic terms:

'Women in the Basque Country today form part of a vanguard. It is the vanguard of mothers... This vanguard is invincible. Neither life nor death will detain us... We are under a commitment to defeat fascism, to crush it like a harmful animal caught in a snare. And we will carry it out.'<sup>25</sup>

The French committee sold postcards at many of its local events to raise money for Spain, which featured Spanish infants and the slogan '*Au secours des enfants Espagnols!* (Help the Spanish Children!)'. On the reverse, there was a pre-written message which asked women:

'Would you leave a beautiful child to suffer hunger? By buying this card, you are giving them a bowl of milk. With two cards we can give one pound of bread, eight cards we can give one kilo of sugar, ten cards we can give one can of condensed milk for the Spanish children'.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of motherhood also impacted how women perceived their Spanish counterparts; Roseanna Webster has argued that British women 'repeatedly portrayed Spanish females as defenceless victims' which allowed British women to 'ascribe to themselves the power to provide relief'. Conversely, they also depicted Spanish women as 'resilient and resourceful', although these traits were intrinsically tied to their roles as mothers, 'thus establishing a sense of unity and affinity based on shared experience' between British and Spanish women.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, violent imagery and language was also used by the CMF to lend a certain shock value to their work. Caroline Ann Brothers, in her examination of

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<sup>25</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 56 – 57.

<sup>26</sup> 'Cartes Postales', Pandor, 543\_2\_13, Docs. 112, 113 and 114.

<sup>27</sup> Webster, 'A Spanish Housewife is Your Next-Door Neighbour': British Women and the Spanish Civil War', p. 403 and 405.

photography of the Spanish conflict, has identified that the French public were more likely to be exposed to violent images in their newspapers than the British public, including civilians 'contorted in pain as they fell, or... lying open-eyed in death'.<sup>28</sup> The publication of images on these subjects similarly varied on a national level in CMF periodicals: four editions of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* were dedicated to exposing the suffering of the people of Spain and all included images of dead or injured individuals, while *Woman To-day* tended not to publish such photographs. A special edition of the French journal published in February 1937, for example, used disturbing images of children injured or killed by bombings 'which the fascists do there'.<sup>29</sup> Children were pictured lifeless or laid in hospital beds with bandages around their heads. There was also a page dedicated to 'the cruel exodus of mothers', who were forced to 'leave their homes, populated with memories so dear, to safeguard the most important: their children.' This page specifically calls out to French mothers: 'Mothers of France! Come help them!'<sup>30</sup>

In another edition of the French journal, an image of two women with shaved heads was printed with the caption:

'Above two victims of the Spanish fascist savagery... Their hair was cut short. Only a small lock is left in front of which is attached a red ribbon. A sign hangs on their necks. Then, dressed in a *cache-sexe*, with their hands behind their backs, they must go through the villages. After which they are shot!'<sup>31</sup>

On the same double page spread, two images of dead or severely injured Spanish girls were published, which carried the simple title: "Look".<sup>32</sup> Kristine Byron has argued that 'the pain and sacrifice of motherhood mark revolutionary women's lives as deeply as any political event', and the CMF utilised this common and sometimes

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<sup>28</sup> Caroline Ann Brothers, 'French and British Press Photography of the Spanish Civil War: Ideology, Iconography, *Mentalité*' (PhD: University College London, 1991), pp. 236, 213 and 221.

<sup>29</sup> 'Après les bombardements... ce que les fascistes en font !', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (February 1937), p.2.

<sup>30</sup> 'Le cruel exode des mères', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (February 1937), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Massacre des innocents', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (November 1936), p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.



painful experience of motherhood to encourage its members to empathise with their Spanish counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Leila Rupp has argued that this maternal rhetoric that emphasised the pain of mothers stemmed from the fact that, 'violence against women, like motherhood, had the potential to unite women across cultures, since all women were fair game, especially in war'.<sup>34</sup>

The British section of the CMF created a 'Food for Spain Fund' which received monetary donations from members which were intended for civilians living in war zones. Many donations were sent with messages that cited motherhood as the reason for their donation; a supporter in Guildford sent money to cover the cost of six postcards, and asked that the committee keep the rest of the money as a further donation to Spain. She said that 'two shillings of the amount my little boy collected himself in pennies and halfpennies'.<sup>35</sup> One message linked the plight of Spanish mothers with that of Austrian Jewish refugees in Britain:

*'Motherhood knows no barriers – Please accept this small sum for your Food for Spain fund. I am an Austrian Jewish refugee. My husband has died in a German prison... I cannot give you more, but I send it with my love to the Spanish women, whose children are being starved and murdered by the same people who have broken up my home and made me a widow. Motherhood knows no barrier of race or creed'.<sup>36</sup>*

Another Austrian Jewish woman seeking refuge in Britain sent £2, the first money that she had earned in the country. She expressed that 'if we all work to help each other, we shall be able to overcome [fascism], and people will no longer be driven from their homes, nor suffer the horrors of war'.<sup>37</sup>

*Mujeres*, caring, non-violent, and often presented as victims were contrasted with *milicianas* in CMF propaganda. *Milicianas* were women who had stepped outside

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<sup>33</sup> Kristine Byron, 'Writing the Female Revolutionary Self: Dolores Ibárruri and the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2004), p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> Rupp, 'The Making of International Women's Organisations', p. 223.

<sup>35</sup> "For our dear sisters and their children in Spain", *Woman To-day* (January 1939), p 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

the bounds of traditional femininity by taking up arms in the war.<sup>38</sup> They were often from 'left-of-centre political and syndicalist organisations' and had received 'rudimentary military instruction, were encouraged to expand their physical sphere of existence by changes as prosaic as wearing pants... and generally to participate in the making of a revolution'. Gina Herrmann has argued that the *miliciana*, 'for a short time, actually became *the* icon of the anti-fascist cause'.<sup>39</sup> Mary Nash has argued that *milicianas* 'exemplified the capacity of the Spanish people to confront the brutal aggression of the fascist rebels', and their deaths in battle represented the 'glorious' struggle against fascism.<sup>40</sup> The CMF was not the first left-wing periodical to develop this image of Spanish women at arms, but actively adopted it to demonstrate that women had a level of utility in the conflict. However, the concept of the *miliciana* was not hailed as progressive in all corners of the media. The *Daily Mail* portrayed *milicianas* as 'The Women Who Burn Churches', 'Red Carmens' and 'atrocities', and other newspapers believed that *milicianas* contributed to the 'destabilisation of society', as they represented the unsettling idea that 'all that womanhood traditionally stands for is rapidly disappearing'.<sup>41</sup>

*Milicianas* served as a 'call to arms, as a way to encourage (or shame) men into participation in the fight' in Republican propaganda, but they were also used by anti-fascist media outside of Spain to demonstrate the supposed value bestowed upon women by Spanish Republicans in the fight against fascism.<sup>42</sup> The *miliciana* was used in left-wing Spanish propaganda to oblige men to 'fulfil what was at times described as their 'virile' role as soldiers', a tactic which Mary Nash has argued 'seduced, enticed, or shocked men into carrying out their military duties'.<sup>43</sup> However,

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<sup>38</sup> For a full examination of the role of *milicianas* in the Spanish Civil War see, Lisa Lines, *Milicianas: Women in Combat in the Spanish Civil War* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Gina Herrmann, 'Voices of the Vanquished: Leftist women and the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003), p. 12 and 13.

<sup>40</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The militarisation of women's lives* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 127.

<sup>42</sup> Herrmann, 'Voices of the Vanquished: Leftist women and the Spanish Civil War', p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 53.

in propaganda outside Spain, the image of a woman taking up arms in defence of her country was deployed to demonstrate the active movement towards the emancipation of women in Spanish society, as women contributed to the war effort on the same footing as men.

*Milicianas* were presented as having various motivations for taking up arms; their affiliation with left-wing parties, their opposition to fascism, and the deaths of close friends and family during the conflict were all cited as reasons that women chose to fight. According to Dolores Ibárruri, one militia woman claimed that she had joined the army

‘to fight fascism, to crush the enemies of the working people and... to avenge the death of my brother... I have come here to join the ranks to take the place he would have occupied, and to avenge his death, to show the fascist scoundrels that when men die, women take their place... [women were] fighting with the same enthusiasm and courage as the men’.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the Spanish CMF journal *Mujeres* published the story of Maria Elisa Garcia. She had joined a militia with her father, who was then killed while fighting on the Lugones front. She was transferred to the Basque Mountains, where on a cold evening, the men of her company ‘assured her that she did not need to take her turn and should return inside their temporary quarters to warm herself’. Garcia refused stating:

‘No, no, I’m staying here, with you. Yes, I will stay right here. I have to avenge someone. I have to avenge my father’.<sup>45</sup>

The Spanish term for women, ‘*mujeres*’, was not used to refer to women fighting in the militia by the CMF in their journals; rather, *miliciana* was utilised in non-Spanish journals to demarcate militiawomen from women who held traditionally feminine roles during the war. *Woman To-day* emphasised the masculine qualities of *milicianas* by comparing them to ‘Amazons’ who were ‘suppressing their femininity by

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<sup>44</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, ‘Women at the Front’, First published in *Défense* (4 September 1936) [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/Ibarruri/1936/09/04.htm>] Last modified June 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Lines, ‘Female Combatants in the Spanish Civil War: Milicianas on the Front Lines and in the Rear-guard’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2009), p. 176.

taking up arms' and who had become 'the icons of a revolutionary break with tradition'.<sup>46</sup> Images of women shoulder-to-shoulder with their male comrades in CMF journals did, on occasion, inspire British women to try to join their Spanish counterparts. The author Jessica Mitford, for example, wrote of her reaction to seeing *milicianas* in *Woman To-day*:

'I cut pictures out of the papers, determined, steady-looking women, wiry, bright-eyed, gaunt-faced, some middle aged, some almost little girls. How to take my place at their side?'<sup>47</sup>

However, the feminine qualities of the *milicianas* were not neglected in the CMF's representation of these women. For example, Ramona, a militiawoman who had fought in the Majorcan campaign, was described as 'bright-eyed.... aged twenty-four, her solid thighs and round bosom filling out her brown dungaree uniform, a revolver in her belt, her quarter-master's badge on her breast'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the fact that some *milicianas* were mothers was emphasised by the CMF. An Asturian militiawoman was described as

'Simply a woman who understood the duty that the time imposed on everyone, without distinction of sex. A woman who is profoundly, exquisitely wife and mother, and who... wanted to contribute all her strength and all her effort, to avoid a future oppressed by fascism for her children'.<sup>49</sup>

Cynthia Enloe has argued that this image of a Spanish woman with a rifle over her shoulder and a baby in her arms fostered an image of a 'can-do-everything superwoman'. However, for Enloe, the image of the *miliciiana* also reinforced traditional hierarchies.

'[It] seems to imply that the very process of revolutionary warfare, on the one hand, can transform women's role and sense of self-worth, while, on the other hand, sustain the social order that in the past has ensured the reproduction and nurturing of the next generation... But interweaving the images of woman as combatant and mother so tightly suggests that as soon

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<sup>46</sup> Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 127.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 128; Jessica Mitford was a writer and a member of the Mitford sisters who were initially famous in Britain for their stylish lives but gained notoriety as the family split into communist or fascist supporters during the 1930s. Her sister Diana was married to the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Moseley. See Mary S. Lovell, *The Mitford Girls: The Biography of an Extraordinary Family* (London: Little Brown Book Group, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> 'A Girl of the Spanish People', *Woman To-day*, (December 1936), p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Margarita Nelken, 'Une Combattante des Asturies', *Femmes dans l'Action Mondiale* (May – June 1935), p. 11.

as the immediate threat recedes, as soon as the 'war is over' the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby.'<sup>50</sup>

CMF journals used the image of the *miliciana* to promote the idea that Spanish women were contributing to the war as equals with men, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional notions of femininity and motherhood for two reasons. First, it created a sense of connection between CMF members and Spanish women, and second, it mirrored the prevalent gender norms of socialism at the time which expected women to be mothers while also participating in revolutionary movements.

*Woman To-day* reported in December 1936 that *milicianas* had been recalled to the rear-guard by the Republican government, and the CMF was quick to point out that fighting women were not at fault. Rather, the journal cited the reactions of their male comrades as the epicentre of the recall:

'These men, seeing their women fellow-soldiers fall dead, or lie writhing, lost their heads. Horror, or furious rage, took possession of them; forgetting caution... they would rush upon the enemy, calling them Butchers and Fascists, and get needlessly killed themselves. And since there was no time to train away this instinctive chivalry, it was thought best to withdraw women from the fighting ranks.'<sup>51</sup>

The *miliciana*, for the short time that she was able to fight, perhaps served a greater propaganda purpose for the left-wing media outside of Spain than for the Republican cause in Spain; she acted as an emancipatory icon that women could idolise and emulate and encouraged women to contribute what they could to the aid effort.

This dichotomy which positioned women as either mothers or fighters was a feature of almost all the CMF's work. However, overlap was common and, although the CMF did acknowledge the contribution of *milicianas* to the war effort as fighters, their roles as mothers was emphasised just as much, and in some cases, more. Intentionally or not, the CMF continued to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies which imagined women's primary role as mother and caregiver in its campaigns. The

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<sup>50</sup> Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The militarisation of women's lives*, p. 166.

<sup>51</sup> 'A Girl of the Spanish People', *Woman To-day* (December 1936), p. 6.

CMF employed a variety of methods to achieve their goals in Spain, including information campaigns, clothing and aid appeals. The committee utilised maternalist language to create a sense of unity between its members and the Spanish women oppressed by Franco's forces, but this language could be problematic. The committee consistently appealed to an assumed desire on the part of women to have children, which tended to ignore those women who were childless either by choice or otherwise.

### **'The Return of the Housewife': Campaigns against the Nazi Party's Policies on Women**

The CMF and its sibling organisation, the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, were formed in response to the rise of fascism in Germany and the threat that it posed towards the democratic nations of Europe. Nazi policies had a smaller place in CMF journals than the Spanish Civil War, perhaps because the Civil War was viewed as a more immediate problem with atrocities committed by Franco's forces occurring daily, which were generally more visible. The situation in Germany was more of a slow-burning issue, with policies against women developing over time as opposed to exploding into the public consciousness as with the Civil War. For the CMF, women under the Nazi dictatorship were living in exceptional circumstances which saw their rights and position in society eroded as the Nazi government attempted to return women to the home.<sup>52</sup> For the Nazi Party, the state and politics were the domain of men, while women's world was 'her husband, her family, her children, and her home'. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, argued that 'the mission of the woman is to be beautiful and to bring children into the world... the female bird pretties herself for her mate and hatches the eggs for him. In exchange, the mate takes care

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<sup>52</sup> For more detail on the Nazi rise to power in Germany, see: Tim Kirk, *Nazi Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); John J. Michalczyk, *Confront!: Resistance in Nazi Germany* (New York: P. Lang, 2004); Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

of gathering the food, and stands guard and wards off the enemy'. The Nazi 'resurrection' of the German state was envisioned as an entirely male event.<sup>53</sup>

The number of soldiers killed during the First World War stimulated something of a social crisis in Germany, creating a vacuum of empty jobs which women filled both during and after the war. It soon became apparent to employers that hiring women for white collar positions like typists or secretaries would be preferable to hiring men, as women were willing to accept lower wages, were less likely to belong to a union, and, it was believed, had less desire to be promoted.<sup>54</sup> The economic emancipation of women combined with increased access to family planning materials drastically changed how women envisioned the course of their lives. This, in conjunction with a declining birth-rate, led to a rise in anti-feminist thought throughout Germany in the Weimar period. For example, one organisation, the German League for the Prevention of the Emancipation of Women, believed that the 'women's movement was part of an international Jewish conspiracy to subvert the German family and thus destroy the German race.' According to the League, this Jewish conspiracy encouraged women to neglect their 'proper task' of producing and rearing children in favour of gaining their economic independence, leaving German society at the mercy of the Jewish race.<sup>55</sup> Hitler adopted this idea for Nazi policy, as he told a meeting of National Socialist women in September 1934 that women's emancipation was invented by 'Jewish intellectuals' and was fundamentally 'un-German'.<sup>56</sup>

The role of women in the Nazi state has been debated often in the historiography of the period; Gisela Bock has analysed Nazi maternity policies and

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<sup>53</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: How the Nazis Won over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 331 and 332.

<sup>54</sup> Richard J. Evans, 'German Women and the Triumph of Hitler', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1976), p. 136.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: How the Nazis Won over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation*, p. 331.

argues that they actually pursued a highly racialised 'policy of birth-prevention or anti-natalism' through forced sterilisation, abortion, marriage restrictions and genocide, as opposed to the 'common assumption' that the Nazi party emphasised pro-natalism and 'a cult of motherhood'. Bock argued that the Nazi's encouragement of Aryan families to procreate was actually fairly comparable to welfare reforms elsewhere in Europe in this period and was not exceptionally pronatalist.<sup>57</sup> For Bock, German women were victims of violent Nazi policies which tried to avoid the possibility of 'undesirable' people reproducing, and were not victims simply because of their sex; she particularly pointed to directions from Goebbels' Ministry for Propaganda which stressed that 'the goal is not: "children at any cost", but: "racially worthy, physically and mentally unaffected children of German families."' <sup>58</sup> She rejected Claudia Koonz's analysis of women's role in the Nazi state because, in Bock's opinion, Koonz had assigned German women a share of the guilt for Nazi atrocities because they 'believed in motherhood and [were] nothing else but mothers and wives' and often did not resist fascist policies. Bock rejected this, claiming that women who were considered Nazis 'were rarely mothers and did not act as mothers', instead adjusting themselves 'to male-dominated political, professional and job strategies'.<sup>59</sup> Anita Grossman has criticised this view, accusing Bock of coming 'curiously close to implying that non-mothers are not really women' when she posited that sterilisation and subsequent childlessness was 'uniquely painful' for women, and thus that the women most intimately involved in carrying out Nazi policy were childless and largely 'male identified'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Gisela Bock, 'Antinatalism, maternity and paternity in National Socialist Racism' in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (ed.) *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880-1950s* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 233 – 234.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 240.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 250.

<sup>60</sup> Anita Grossman, 'Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism', *Gender and History*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1991), p. 355.



On the other hand, Claudia Koonz has argued that 'Aryan' women benefitted on the whole from the Nazi dictatorship because of material incentives like marriage loans, while 'undesirable' women faced coercive, violent policies which included forced sterilisations and abortions. Koonz argues that women who were living under the Nazi regime without protesting its injustices were reinforcing the 'mirage' of German society in this period, by making the 'world a more pleasant place in which to live for the members of their community' while simultaneously making life 'unbearable and later impossible' for "racially unworthy" citizens. For Koonz, women who did not actively resist the Nazi government in some way were legitimising Nazi policies which discriminated against people who did not resemble their ideal citizens:

'As fanatical Nazis or lukewarm tagalongs, they resolutely turned their heads away from assaults against socialists, Jews, religious dissenters, the handicapped and "degenerates". They gazed instead at their own cradles, children, and "Aryan" families. Mothers and wives... made a vital contribution to Nazi power by preserving the illusion of love in an environment of hatred'.<sup>61</sup>

Some women had turned to the Nazi party because the Weimar Republic 'had failed to provide them with a secure and worthwhile life', and Nazi promises of stability and a 'rewarding' life as a housewife were attractive.<sup>62</sup> Jill Stephenson has suggested that the Nazis' policies of gender segregation could be seen as actually providing Aryan women with the 'space' to empower themselves.<sup>63</sup> However, Nazi policies towards women were complex and changed depending on a multitude of factors including, but not limited to, 'race'. Thus, the victim vs. perpetrator argument is not as simple as either Bock or Koonz have presented it.

For the CMF, Nazi attacks on women's right to work and the position of women in German society were worrying. Women were slowly stripped of rights which were fundamental to maintaining a level of economic independence, beginning with the

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<sup>61</sup> Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Evans, 'German Women and the Triumph of Hitler', p. 154.

<sup>63</sup> Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, p. 5.

removal of married women from public service jobs. The Weimar government had started this process before Hitler came to power; in May 1932, Brüning's government passed legislation which allowed the dismissal of married women public servants if 'their financial maintenance seemed... to be guaranteed in the long term'. This was extended by Hitler's government in June 1933, when the dismissal of married women from public service if their husband was in state employment was made mandatory.<sup>64</sup> However, women's employment was essential to the German economy and no efforts were made to exclude women from low level or private sector jobs. Almost 90% of single German women were listed as employed in some manner in the 1939 census, and women were often viewed as a 'reserve army' whenever shortages of workers arose, particularly as Germany prepared for war in the late 1930s.<sup>65</sup>

At the first CMF congress in August 1934, the erosion of women's right to work in Germany was explored in Duchêne's report on the situation of women since the First World War. Duchêne expressed the fear that for women, 'the most basic right of all humans, the right to work, that is to say, the right to bread and independence' was under threat. The report included several anecdotes which demonstrated the extent to which women were being forced out of work: the report claimed that German women who worked in offices, shops or factories had to 'return to domestic service', and cited the example of Landeshut in Silesia, where all the waitresses had apparently been 'replaced by men' over the course of three days. The CMF labelled these actions as 'pure demagoguery', only legalised through a desire

- '1) To create situations and spaces for the Nazis;
- 2) To lower the salaries of the whole of the working class... to replace them with men forced to accept the lower salaries of women;
- 3) To develop artificial competition between men and women;
- 4) To confine women to the home, to enslave them in a state of absolute economic dependence.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 51-52.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>66</sup> Duchêne, 'Rapport : La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p.1 and 3.

The CMF presented this as an attempt by the German government to return women to 'the slavery of primitive times', in which they depended 'economically on men in order to force them into submission' which would force women to 'return to and remain in the home'. In the committee's opinion, the Nazis were trying 'to secure women in a state of inferiority and deprive them of education'.<sup>67</sup>

This report drew upon testimony from German women found in *Die Deutsche Kämpferin*, a magazine which the CMF described as 'published in Berlin by bourgeois women', but which was in fact edited by the fascist Sophie Rogge-Börner. Rogge-Börner has been identified as one of the major leaders of the *völkisch* movement which started in Weimar Germany as 'a reaction to the democratic and (partially) internationalist impetus of the 'old' women's movement'.<sup>68</sup> She linked gender inequality to the rise of a 'Jewish patriarchy', and believed that 'the restoration of original gender equality through female emancipation was the necessary precondition for the renewal of the purity and the superiority of the Nordic-Germanic 'race''. Rogge-Börner also believed that Jewish women 'could not escape their 'racial' destiny', reinforcing the exclusion that German Jewish women had felt within the women's movement from its foundation in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> After the Second World War, she would argue that the only crimes that Hitler and the Third Reich were guilty of were 'their sexism and the death of German soldiers and civilians', thereby refusing to acknowledge the systemic murder of the Jews.<sup>70</sup> It would be surprising if the CMF were knowingly publicising content from a pro-Nazi magazine and it is difficult to believe that the very well-connected committee was unaware of the beliefs and racial ideologies of its founder. However, it could be the case that either that the CMF knew only that the magazine supported women's parity with men

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 15 and 16.

<sup>68</sup> Jennifer Meyer, 'Towards equality for women and men from one race: Sophie Rogge-Börner's racial-feminist philosophy of education', *Gender and Education*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2017), p. 148.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 152 and 153.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

and carried stories about how Nazi employment policies were negatively affecting women, or that they were aware of the magazine's fascist links but saw the stories from individual women as an indispensable resource to use in the anti-fascist fight.

The CMF used testimonies published in *Die Deutsche Kämpferin* from German women who felt that Nazi policies had stripped them of their livelihood, which Rogge-Börner described as 'Nazi demagoguery regarding the model German family life'. She doubted the potential success of Nazi policies regarding gender segregation, as, according to the CMF, she expressed the belief that 'child-loving women would not be able to preserve German blood alone, if it was spoiled... by men accustomed to not taking responsibility [for their children].' <sup>71</sup> Rogge-Börner argued that ancient Germanic women had had the same rights as men, and women had only become unequal due to 'the introduction of so-called 'Jewish' patriarchy'. She argued that women should be equal with men under the racial hierarchy of the Third Reich as a result. The CMF report included a quote from a 'Frau Berner', who related this to attacks on women's right to work, stating that 'women should not again be reduced to the level of animal reproducers; the problem of work must not become a problem of sex'. <sup>72</sup>

According to the CMF, fascism in both the German and Italian models tried to 'instill in women and girls petty, reactionary, and degrading ideas on the family, education, people, and race' which were representative of the ideology's 'incapacity, lying demagoguery, [and] rottenness'. The CMF warned that some of these aspects of fascism had begun to develop in the governments of some western states; France, England, the United States, Belgium, and Spain were targeted for 'attacking... democratic freedoms and promoting fascist gangs' and ultimately 'lead[ing] a bloody

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<sup>71</sup> Duchêne, 'Rapport : La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 26 and 27.

<sup>72</sup> Meyer, 'Towards equality for women and men from one race : Sophie Rogge-Börner's racial-feminist philosophy of education', p. 150 ; Duchêne, 'Rapport : La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 27.

struggle against the labouring population'.<sup>73</sup> The CMF predicted that, because of the threat posed by German fascism in many areas, 'the future of people is at stake in 1934 as it was in 1914, and more than in 1914', and asked mothers 'to instil in their children the love of all people of the earth, without distinction of race or colour' to combat discriminatory Nazi propaganda.<sup>74</sup> In addition, women linked with the CMF went to Germany on their own initiative to investigate the reports emanating from the country. Ellen Wilkinson travelled to Germany and reported that, 'while the causes of Nazi violence against women are as yet fewer than the number of their male victims, the horrible torture of Frau Marie Jankowski...shows that women are not immune from the sickening Nazi savagery'.<sup>75</sup>

The CMF began their German campaign by appealing to women as wives and mothers both in and outside of Germany. The position of German women as the mothers, wives, and daughters of men who had been killed in World War One or who could be mobilised in the case of future war was central to CMF appeals. One article published in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* in 1936 used the memory of the First World War to implore German women to try to avoid a new conflict at all costs. They specifically positioned this in terms of women's familial roles in men's lives by recalling 'our brothers, our husbands, our sons killed, millions wounded. We recall our fears as mothers and wives, the horrors of aerial bombardments'. The author used this common memory to encourage German women to expose Nazi rearmament plans by relating it to the future world conflict.

'Are we close to recommencing these years of misery, those bloody sacrifices? Will we allow each other, you and us, our husbands and our children to kill each other for the cannon and ammunition merchants? Will

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<sup>73</sup> 'Manifeste : Voté pour le Congrès mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', August 1934, Pandor, 543\_2\_1, Doc. 2, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*, p. 284; Marie Jankowski was a member of the German Social Democratic Party who was arrested and arrested by the SA in the Köpenick's Blutwoche. She survived and publicised the injuries she had received.

we see in our cities your children and our people dying, asphyxiated or burned alive by gas and incendiary bombs?'<sup>76</sup>

Despite a rapid increase in militaristic aggression emanating from the Nazi government, the CMF believed that there was still a strong pacifist current among German civilians, who 'hate the methods of their government', and encouraged women to 'stretch out our hands over borders' to create a feeling of solidarity and the 'certainty of not being alone'. The author of this appeal was convinced that if women could 'unite to defend their children, their husbands, and their brothers, to impose on governments the pacifist will of people, we could avoid bloody and useless collisions where yours and ours have already lost, and would continue to lose, their lives'.<sup>77</sup>

The appeal was not only intended to encourage German women to use their 'exceptional' position in the Nazi family to express their opposition to militarism and effect change through social channels as opposed to political or legal avenues. It was also intended to stress the importance of international cooperation as a means of fighting fascism to the journal's readers in France and Britain. As tensions between the French and German governments rose because of German re-militarisation, the CMF felt it was necessary to encourage French women to continue to work with German women to fight fascism. Similarly, *Woman To-day* made it clear that no 'attempts [would be] made here to stir up hatred of our German sisters'. Regardless of the nationality of the woman, if she wanted to 'make an end of Nazism and all the horrors it has brought in its sadistic train', she was a friend to British anti-fascist women.<sup>78</sup>

As we have seen with regards to the Spanish Civil War, the CMF tended to dichotomise the experiences of women into that of the traditionally feminine mother and the strong female combatant. This was also true in the case of Germany. The

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<sup>76</sup> 'Appel aux femmes et aux mères allemandes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April 1936), p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

CMF presented the Nazi push against married women's right to work as inextricably linked with the return of women to the home, while the active fight of some German women against fascism was reported separately. The CMF recognised that the resistance of German women to the Nazi regime was 'manifesting itself more and more', as it cited reports of women workers who had protested outside of government buildings to secure the release of political prisoners, 'sometimes with success'. The CMF argued that women's resistance seemed to be more overt than that of men, as 'women reacted more quickly than men and show[ed] a tenacious resistance' to Nazi policy, a point which Richard Evans has also argued; for Evans, female resistance was 'generally more outspoken, more violent and more widespread than male resistance'.<sup>79</sup> Claudia Koonz has posited that this was because women were less likely than their male counterparts to be sent to concentration camps, due in part to the Nazi perception of women as not 'sufficiently intelligent or independent' to rebel politically.<sup>80</sup>

The CMF often publicised the cases of women who had died because of their resistance to the Nazi dictatorship. The group highlighted the work of women like Helene Glatzer, Margarethe Walther and Liesel Paxmann, who were all killed because of their opposition to the Nazi regime.<sup>81</sup> These women shared similar personal politics as most, if not all, were members of the KPD. Helene Glatzer, for example, worked for the Comintern and studied at the International Lenin School in Moscow for three years before her return to Germany in 1934.<sup>82</sup> The CMF organised delegations to visit Germany to advocate for imprisoned women, including a British delegation that consisted of Monica Whately, the leader of the feminist Six Point

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<sup>79</sup> Duchêne, 'Rapport : La situation des femmes au 20ème anniversaire de la guerre', p. 24 and 25; Evans, 'German Women and the Triumph of Hitler', p. 159.

<sup>80</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 335.

<sup>81</sup> Helene Glatzer was arrested, sent to a work camp and was murdered by the Gestapo in 1935, Margarethe Walther was apparently 'defenestrated' by the Nazi authorities, and Liesel Paxmann was found dead in her Gestapo prison cell, apparently of suicide.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Dietz Verlag, 'Helene Glatzer', Last modified May 2008 [<https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html?ID=4353&highlight=Helene%20Glatzer>] Accessed 12.12.2017.

Group, Selina Cooper, a political activist allied with the Labour Party, and 'Mrs B. Pierce-Jones'. In October 1934, this delegation travelled to Germany to plead the case of Centa Beimler, the imprisoned wife of the communist Hans Beimler, and her family.<sup>83</sup> Hans Beimler had previously been detained in Dachau but had escaped in 1933.<sup>84</sup> The delegation aimed to 'persuade the [Nazi] authorities to set Mrs. Beimler and her sister free – or give them a chance to state their case in a trial; to get permission to take the children out of the country where they were regarded with suspicion, and to provide a home for them abroad'. The report detailed the issues the delegation faced with the Nazi government, and because they were advocating for a political prisoner they acknowledged that they had to be 'doubly careful' not to invoke the wrath of the Nazi regime.<sup>85</sup>

The delegation was refused access to Centa Beimler because a few months previously a delegation from WILPF had met with her and, according to the German government, 'some of their members had carried on anti-government activity in Germany'. In addition, they were refused access because the person on whose behalf they were intervening was a communist, and as such 'should not be allowed to continue their further propaganda abroad'. In response to comments from the delegation about how a refusal to see Beimler would be interpreted outside of Germany, the government responded that

'apart from being deprived of permission to work against the state, [she] was better off than many free persons in their home... Preventative custody did not mean that she had been guilty of a criminal offence, but – "there were other ways of working against the State than holding a gun in your hand"' .<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Josie McLellan, *Anti-Fascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 125 – 126. This text contains interesting testimony from Centa Beimler on the disappointing realities of being married to a dedicated party functionary.

<sup>84</sup> For information on Hans Beimler's experiences in Nazi Germany, see Christopher Dillon, 'We'll Meet Again in Dachau': The Early Dachau SS and the Narrative of Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2010), pp. 535 – 554.

<sup>85</sup> Monica Whately, Selina J. Cooper, and B. Pierce-Jones, 'A Visit to Germany: The Report of a Delegation to Munich organised by the British Women's Committee Against War and Fascism' (1934), document no. 17, Selina J. Cooper Archives, DDX 1137/2, Lancashire Archives, p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 5.



For these delegates, the trip was highly dissatisfactory and did nothing to reassure them on the fate of female political prisoners under the Nazi regime. They felt it was essential for British people to 'voice their protest in a very definite form' and they asked their readers whether the 'women of England [would] be silent, while their German sisters are being subjected to imprisonment, torture – and even death?'<sup>87</sup>

Liselotte Herrmann was another female political activist imprisoned in Nazi Germany that the CMF advocated for. She was an ideal subject for the CMF's advocacy for three reasons: first, she 'embodied the role of the emancipated woman' for feminist members of the group, as she had attended the technical universities in Stuttgart and Berlin to study chemistry and biology, as well as holding employment as a stenographer in her father's engineering office.<sup>88</sup> Second, she was perceived as representing the 'communist ideal' because she was active in communist politics even under the Nazi dictatorship; she was closely linked to the head of the illegal KPD in Württemberg, Stefan Lovacz, and she fed information to the Swiss communist party about the secret production of armaments in Friedrichshafen and Celle. Third, and most important for the CMF, was that she played the role of 'considerate mother'. She had a son in May 1934, whose father was a communist activist who had died in 1933, making her a young, working, single mother.<sup>89</sup> Her son was only a year and a half old when she was arrested at the end of 1935 and sent to Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, which was infamous for being the centre for Nazi executions. According to Claudia Koonz, Hermann was often threatened with the idea that her son would be brought up in a 'fanatical Nazi home' if she did not provide information on the activities of her comrades. She wrote in a letter from prison that she found it 'very difficult... to leave and also to say good-bye to a child, knowing that Germany will be destroyed by war'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 294; Karl Dietz Verlag, 'Liselotte Herrmann', Last modified May 2008 [<https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html?ID=4447>] Accessed 12.12.2017.

<sup>89</sup> Carle, 'Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route : entre pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme', p. 294.

<sup>90</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 336.

Herrmann spent over a year in prison being tortured and kept in chains before she was sentenced to death for 'treason and preparation of high treason'.<sup>91</sup> She was executed in June 1938 by guillotine.

The CMF made a concerted effort to convince the German government to release Liselotte Herrmann in the year before her execution. For the most part, the organisation published appeals which portrayed Herrmann in heroic terms, pointing to her background as a student of the natural sciences and as a 'loving and vigilant mother'. In Herrmann's case, the committee utilised appeals as their main campaign strategy; although, as evidenced by the CMF's visit to Germany to ensure Centa Beimler's safety, on occasion CMF delegations would be sent to investigate conditions in different countries, this was not the case here. Relations with Germany had deteriorated far enough by Herrmann's imprisonment from 1935 to 1938 to make a visit impossible. Instead, the committee presented her as 'a brave and loyal woman... full of uprightness and honesty, a character of radiant gaiety, of warm heart, open to all that is beautiful and good' in appeals to highlight her suffering and garner attention to her plight. This depiction was used to question the morality of the German government in detaining Herrmann under the constant threat of torture for her political beliefs; the group asked

'What did this young woman do to be put to death under the axe of the executioner? What crime has been committed for a human being to be exposed to such a moral martyrdom? Can such a being do something dishonourable or commit acts which, according to current conceptions of civilisation and good morals, deserve the death penalty?'<sup>92</sup>

Her only crime, according to the appeal, was being a 'sincere' person who had 'always opposed the politics of fascism, [the] policy of destroying culture and preparing for a frightful war'. The group even compared Herrmann's heroism to that of Joan of Arc, as the CMF highlighted that both women were punished for defending

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<sup>91</sup> 'Liselotte Hermann and Hermann Stöhr', Last modified May 2018 [[http://www.gedenkstaette-ploetzensee.de/03\\_e.html](http://www.gedenkstaette-ploetzensee.de/03_e.html)], Accessed 28.08.2018.

<sup>92</sup> 'La sort d'une mère' (1937), Duchêne Archives, F<sup>A</sup> res 316, Doc. 22.

their beliefs and refused to renounce them even when threatened with death. However, the CMF did not want Herrmann to suffer the same fate as Joan of Arc and receive retribution after her death. The committee emphasised that 'Lilo Herrmann must be saved' from execution.<sup>93</sup>

A letter written to the CMF by Martha Berg-Andre, the wife of the executed KPD politician Edgar Andre, explained how unique Herrmann's case was. She claimed that before Herrmann, no anti-fascist woman had been executed in Nazi prisons; whenever women had been sentenced to death previously, their sentence had always been commuted to either 15 years or life in prison. Berg-Andre claimed that, despite the threat of harsh custodial sentences, German women, including Liselotte Herrmann, had not been dissuaded from joining the anti-fascist fight and had continued to resist the Nazi dictatorship and its policies. However, Berg-Andre made it clear that Herrmann's case was different from the anti-fascist women who had been imprisoned before her, in that the Nazi government intended to use her as an example of their new punishments for female communist activists. She claimed that 'the death of Liselotte Herrmann is expected to frighten the voices of other women and mothers into silence'.<sup>94</sup> Herrmann's case also left Nazi women horrified and confused; women did not understand why an "Aryan" woman, whose only crime was to support a political cause in opposition to the Nazi regime, was executed in contravention of the propaganda about motherhood that they were consistently exposed to. Claudia Koonz cited a letter written by one loyal female Nazi who asked if it was 'really necessary... to kill a German mother because of her opinions? With 99 per cent of the *Volk* solidly on Hitler's side, why did someone choose to make her baby motherless?'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> 'From Martha Berg-André to the Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', Duchêne Archives, F<sup>A</sup> res 316, Doc. 21, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 336.

Members of the CMF were encouraged to personally contribute to the campaign to release Hermann from prison; women were asked to send her letters to boost her morale, although it cannot be verified if she ever actually had the opportunity to read them. In addition, the group asked its members to send letters to the wives of high-ranking German officials to plead the cases of women detained in prisons and concentration camps. They were encouraged to address 'clemency petitions and protest letters' to the wives of Hermann Goering, Hitler's closest ally, and Joseph Goebbels, the Reich propaganda minister.<sup>96</sup> The organisation believed that their best chance of securing Hermann's release was through the wives of major government officials, who, it was hoped, would use their close relationships with the most powerful men in Germany to influence them to release female political prisoners. It was also most likely assumed that, because of their roles as wives and mothers, both Emmy Goering and Magda Goebbels would feel a level of sympathy towards the imprisoned mother who had been separated from her young child. This tactic was not successful; Liselotte Hermann was executed for her opposition to the regime and her connections to the KPD despite the campaign to contact the wives of Nazi officials. However, the letter writing campaign was unique amongst the campaigns organised by the CMF in that it directly engaged its rank-and-file members in the anti-fascist work of the group; by asking women to write letters of support and letters of protest, this campaign encouraged a personal engagement that was different to any other work they did. The goal was to encourage women to invoke their shared experiences of motherhood to stimulate an emotional response in the receiver be it through support or empathy.

### **'To-day China is near us and so are her people': Response to the Humanitarian Crises of the Second Sino-Japanese War**

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<sup>96</sup> 'La sort d'une mère' (1937), Duchêne Archives, F<sup>A</sup> res 316, Doc. 22.

While much of the work that the CMF did in the late 1930s focused on the rise of fascist ideology and the threat of war in Europe, there was one campaign which took the CMF's focus beyond European borders. The Second-Sino Japanese War, which began in 1937 and ended in 1945, has been widely regarded as the 'biggest Asian war of the twentieth century', which involved 'larger numbers of combatants, inflicted more carnage and destruction on both sides than even the American war against the peoples of Indochina'.<sup>97</sup> Lloyd Eastman has estimated that the Chinese civilian and military casualties as a result of the war totalled between fifteen and twenty million people, and the damage to property was 'incalculable'.<sup>98</sup> Women and children were often the focus of Japanese violence; the most infamous example of this was the Nanjing massacre, in which as many as 300,000 Chinese civilians and unarmed soldiers were killed and 80,000 Chinese women and girls were raped.<sup>99</sup>

For many on the left, the war in China resembled the on-going war in Spain; imperial Japanese aggression was synonymous with fascist aggression and therefore a major threat. One International Brigader in Spain positioned both conflicts as 'people's wars' in a letter to his wife: 'The struggle against fascism here in Spain and the fight of the Chinese people against Japanese aggression... are the most important points in the struggle against Fascism throughout the world'.<sup>100</sup> However, the impact of the Spanish Civil War and its geographical proximity to British and French leftist activists meant that generally, Chinese aid campaigns were overshadowed by Spanish ones in this period. Tom Buchanan has argued that British intellectuals 'did not see the [Sino-Japanese] conflict as the hinge on which civilisation

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<sup>97</sup> Herbert P. Bix, 'The Showa Emperor's "Monologue" and the Problem of War Responsibility', *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1992), p. 345.

<sup>98</sup> Lloyd E. Eastman, 'Nationalist China during the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945', in John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 13: Republican China 1912–1949, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 547.

<sup>99</sup> This is the highest Chinese estimate, while some Japanese sources claim that fewer than 100 were killed and 'very few' were raped; Joshua A. Fogel, *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> Tom Buchanan, 'Shanghai – Madrid Axis'? Comparing British Responses to the Conflicts in Spain and China, 1936–39', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2012), p. 542.

turned' as they did the Spanish Civil War, and this was reflected in the comparative lack of activist campaigns centred on China.<sup>101</sup>

The CMF described the second Sino-Japanese War as 'the cruellest War the World has ever seen' because of the ever-increasing brutality of the conflict. J. Yang, a representative of the 'Association of Chinese Women', told *Woman To-day* that 'thousands of peaceful homes have been reduced to ruins, women and children have been murdered in cold blood, and many of those survived have seen their dear ones tortured and killed before their very eyes'. Despite this, the CMF was determined not to present Chinese women as weak; they challenged the popular image in the West of Chinese women as 'ethereal and dainty creatures... [who] have eyebrows as thin as that of a moth, and feet that move so light that they, under the rustling silk, would not even leave footprints on the dust ... [an image which] belong[ed] to the dead and irrevocable past'. The CMF claimed that the role of women in Chinese society had transformed into something more substantial because of the conflict; Chinese women had to 'fight, not only for their freedom, but also for their own existence', and they had proved that they were 'no less serviceable than men in their war for national existence'. They were presented as having an 'unsurpassed record for physical valour and courage', and comparisons to Florence Nightingale, Joan of Arc, 'Boadicea', and Edith Cavell, the British nurse who was martyred in World War One, were invoked.<sup>102</sup> Chinese women were praised and their culture elevated; for example, when considering how Chinese women would approach serious societal questions, *Woman*

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 536; For further reading see: Tom Buchanan, *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David S. G. Goodman, 'Revolutionary Women and Women in the Revolution: The Chinese Communist Party and Women in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937 – 1945', *The China Quarterly*, No. 164 (2000), pp. 915 – 942; Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan 1937 – 45: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Penguin, 2014) ; Pan Yihong, 'Feminism and Nationalism in China's War of Resistance against Japan', *The International History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1997), pp. 115 – 130.

<sup>102</sup> J. Yang, 'Chinese Women and the Anti-Japanese Front', *Woman To-day* (November 1937), p. 3 and 10

*To-day* assumed that they would be met with the Chinese 'traditional ingenious way' of thinking.<sup>103</sup>

Many articles were more concerned by the progress made by Chinese women in terms of their rights than the impact that the war had on them. They presented Chinese women as having progressed from being confined to the home and without rights, to having access to education and demanding that they be judged by the same moral standards as men. Chinese women, in theory, had equal status to men in law, but they still faced some issues; 'sex life, loyalty to home and children, relations to men and obligations to the race, the conflict between emotions and ambitions, and the choice of professions' all presented problems for the modern Chinese woman.<sup>104</sup> Some contemporary Chinese women activists viewed the early years of the Second Sino-Japanese conflict as actually contributing to a renewed effort to control women's lives rather than an emancipatory period; Jun Hui, a communist activist, argued in a women's periodical that as the Chinese army had withdrawn in the face of the Japanese invasion, men had tried to regain their control over women's employment, looks, and activities. She compared this regression of women's emancipation to that in fascist states: 'Is not the... slogan that women should concentrate on family affairs like Hitler's attempt to control women by driving them back into the home?'<sup>105</sup>

The CMF also addressed itself to Japanese women, encouraging them to use their influence to alleviate the suffering of the Chinese people. They included an appeal to Japanese women penned at a 'European conference' and published in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, which utilised their role as mothers and wives to implore them to think with such terms in mind when confronted with issues of war and peace. The CMF empathised with the nationalist attitudes that they believed Japanese women held which stemmed from a deep love for their country but argued

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<sup>103</sup> Tsui-Tsing Chang, 'Chinese Women: Past and Present', *Woman To-day* (October 1937), p. 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Yihong, 'Feminism and Nationalism in China's War of Resistance against Japan', p. 117.

that this love was why it was necessary to prevent the 'storm blowing on the Pacific [which] threatens to bring war to the world'. The appeal argued that Japanese women should 'prevent [their] government from training [the nation] in the business of horror and death' and also made it clear that if women loved their families, a desire to stop the war should be a natural reaction: 'You love your children, your husbands, your fathers and your brothers; you will not allow them to be taken and sent to die far from you, for purposes that are foreign to you'.<sup>106</sup>

The CMF likened Japanese actions in China to fascist actions in Europe. Whether the actions of Imperial Japan can be described as 'fascist' has been a major source of debate amongst historians of Japan in the first half of the twentieth century; Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto have argued that the Japanese case was so dissimilar from its European fascist counterparts that it was 'meaningless' to speak of the pre-war Shōwa period of Japanese history in these terms. In their argument, there was 'no mass movement and no cult of the supreme leader' in Japan, but rather there was 'a heavy stress on agrarianism' and 'a central role for military officers'.<sup>107</sup> Duus and Okimoto claim instead that fascists were a 'minor side current' in Japanese politics who did not impact the orientation of the Japanese government in any meaningful way.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, Hilary Conroy has argued that there is still much to be gained from an analysis of fascism in the Japanese context: 'one need only look at the photographs of some of the victims of Japan's China 'incident' (war) to see why historians should ferret out the malignant causes of what Maruyama Masao has called the 'pathology' of Japanese fascism before it is presumed to be a dead (and harmless) matter'.<sup>109</sup> She also challenged Ienaga Saburo's assertion that

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<sup>106</sup> 'Appel de la conférence Européenne aux mères et aux femmes du Japon', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April-May 1936), p.10.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto, 'Comment: Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1979), p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>109</sup> Hilary Conroy, 'Communications to the Editor: Concerning Japanese Fascism', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1981), p. 327.



Japanese society was not fascist because 'there were no concentration camps or mass killings in Japan'. For Conroy, this may mean that oppression was actually 'greater in Japan' because 'every aspect of life was so regimented and controlled that no one could plan a treacherous act worthy of the death penalty'.<sup>110</sup>

Regardless, the CMF did identify similarities between European fascism and Japanese imperialism, both in terms of the extreme militarism they both displayed and in how they treated their citizens, particularly women. The appeal to Japanese mothers used dramatic language to impress upon its readers the threat posed by the rise of fascist ideas in Japan. It argued that women could not 'remain impassive in the face of the bloodthirsty fury of the fascist oligarchy of the Japanese army, revealed to us by the recent events in Tokyo'.<sup>111</sup> The CMF also demonstrated that it understood the struggles faced by Japanese women in wartime:

'Already you suffer the terrible hardships imposed on you by the warlike policy of fascist clans: in squalid factories, girls, sold as slaves to their bosses, toil from morning to night to manufacture ammunition which will cause death among peaceful peoples: in the countryside, women bend under the burden of too much work. Misery and famine are everywhere'.<sup>112</sup>

The committee also had some direct contact with Chinese feminists; with eight other prominent Chinese women, the veteran activist He Xiangning published an open letter in December 1936 to the CMF which expressed the determination of Chinese women to 'support world peace and freedom by a brave national liberation war' and presented their role 'as pacifists against imperialist war'.<sup>113</sup>

The CMF also had another motive to be involved with work on this topic; the committee was concerned that a strong Japan, with bases in China, would be able to

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p. 328.

<sup>111</sup> 'Appel de la conférence Européenne aux mères et aux femmes du Japon', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April-May 1936), p.10; 'Events in Tokyo' refers to the 26 February 1936 Incident when a group of Japanese army soldiers attempted a *coup d'état* to purge the government of their ideological opponents. For more on the February 26 Incident, see Ben-Ami Shillony, *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>112</sup> 'Appel de la conférence Européenne aux mères et aux femmes du Japon', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April-May 1936), p.10.

<sup>113</sup> Yihong, 'Feminism and Nationalism in China's War of Resistance against Japan', p. 118.

launch an attack on the USSR. Under the guise of campaigning for peace with China (as 'the Chinese people only want good neighbourly relations with all'), they argued that the Soviet Union should not be a target for Japan because it 'had repeatedly proved its peaceful will by facts known throughout the world'. It concerned the group that Japan, as 'the master of North China through violence', may have been planning an attack on the Soviet Union, which would force the Soviets to retaliate, thus damaging its image as a peace-loving nation.<sup>114</sup>

Other areas of the Chinese campaign were fuelled by the work of the leader of the British section of the CMF, Charlotte Haldane. Haldane, who was an accomplished journalist, author, and the editor of the British section's journal *Woman To-day*, was approached by the CPGB about the possibility of visiting China and reporting on the Japanese aggression against Chinese civilians. In addition to her work for the Comintern, Haldane was given a temporary assignment as a special correspondent in China for the *Daily Herald* and was also charged with relaying messages from prominent British politicians to the leader of the Republic of China. In her autobiography, Haldane stated that the Labour leader Clement Atlee asked her to 'express verbally to the Generalissimo the sympathy of British Labour with the Chinese cause', and Sir Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the Liberals, entrusted her with a letter expressing 'similar good wishes' to the leader.<sup>115</sup> Haldane also carried a 'sum of money' to China which was given to her by some prominent British women, which she was to give to the wife of the president of China, Sun Yat-sen, for Chinese women's relief organisations. Haldane reflected in her memoir that it would have been amusing to know the 'sentiments of those eminent individuals and the members of

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<sup>114</sup> 'Appel de la conférence Européenne aux mères et aux femmes du Japon', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April-May 1936), p.10.

<sup>115</sup> Haldane, *Truth Will Out*, p. 146; It is unclear if Haldane is referring to Sun Yat-Sen or Chiang Kai-Shek when she mentions the 'Generalissimo'. Chiang Kai-Shek is classified as China's Generalissimo, however, Haldane refers to the Generalissimo's wife as 'Madame Sun Yat-Sen' later in her autobiography.

their organisations had they been informed that under their distinguished auspices an emissary of the Comintern was being flown to China!<sup>116</sup>

Haldane viewed her visit to China in a positive light, even after her break with communism. She talked of meeting the 'Generalissimo', to whom she delivered the messages. She met Madame Sun Yat-sen, the Kuomintang leaders and governmental representatives in all the provinces and towns she visited. She

'made dozens of speeches, inspected universities, schools, hospitals, orphanages; travelled by plane, train, river steamer, sampan, and chair; flew over the Yangtse Gorges; attended banquets and private parties; made a speech in Chinese from the stage of the Chungking theatre; stayed at the British consulates in Canton and Chungking; and in due course flew home with memories of affection, respect and admiration for the Chinese, which I shall never lose.'<sup>117</sup>

She labelled her experience as a 'valuable trip' for her personally, because it gave her

'direct, personal, and wide, if superficial, contacts with the Far East, with the sights, sounds and smells of Asia; with the collective and individual psychology of the Chinese people; with their culture, past and present; with their problems and sufferings, and the methods they were using – some strikingly successful, others, dismal and futile – for tackling them'.<sup>118</sup>

Haldane used her experiences in China to publish a report for the attention of the British government on 'the situation in China and the Far East', in which she provided crucial information on the state of the Chinese army, the aims of the Nationalist government, plans for reconstruction and the necessity of aid for refugees. She argued that China's fight for 'national independence' was also 'very definitely a fight for the principle of democracy', and as such, China looked to the Western democracies for support. However, she was critical of the way these countries had approached the Chinese conflict thus far: she said that the Chinese government and people could not 'help wondering, with rather a bitter smile, how it is that, apparently, the democracies are so anxious to hand to the totalitarian states the instruments with

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 146.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p. 146.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

which they hope to cut off our noses to spite our faces'.<sup>119</sup> Haldane's trip was not 'concerned with political or economic investigation' primarily. However, she felt that the information that she had gathered on this trip would be crucial to influencing the British government's policy on the Chinese situation; Haldane explained that 'in view of the importance of the information [the Chinese government] gave me for an understanding of the situation in the Far East to-day, I felt it my duty on my return to place this information as rapidly as possible before Members of the House of Commons'.<sup>120</sup>

Haldane used her position as editor of *Woman To-day* to further publicise the issues she had seen in China. For example, the January 1939 edition of *Woman To-day* featured Haldane on the cover, proudly holding up a large piece of embroidered Chinese cloth. Her reports focused on the women and children of China and how they were impacted by the war. Chinese children were displaced from their homes and many were injured or made orphans or refugees by the Japanese advance into China. CMF aid campaigns were primarily concerned with the large number of orphans created by this conflict who faced violence and upheaval daily. The majority of these were women and children who were fleeing their homes as the Japanese armies advanced. *Woman To-day* used the term 'warphan' to refer to children who had been orphaned by the conflict, a term first used by Madame Kai-Shek to refer to Chinese children whose parents had been killed during the war. 'Warphans' were described by the CMF as 'innocent refugees [who] have been driven from their homes by Japanese airplanes', who had been 'rendered destitute' by the conflict.<sup>121</sup> The Second Sino-Japanese war created a major refugee crisis within China's borders; Rana Mitter has identified that some 80 million Chinese citizens were forced to become internal

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<sup>119</sup> Charlotte Haldane, 'Report on the Situation in China and the Far East', Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB) Papers, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Box 165, p. 15.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. pp. 1 – 2.

<sup>121</sup> 'Introducing the Warphans', *Woman To-day* (March 1939), p. 20.

refugees during the war, with that number potentially reaching as high as 100 million, constituting approximately 15 to 20 per cent of the population.<sup>122</sup> Haldane stressed that British CMF members should care about the plight of China because more frequent travel had made it so that 'to-day China is near us and so are her people'; she proved this by stating that her journey from London to Hong Kong only took five and a half days of flying.<sup>123</sup>

The CMF's response to the issues faced by 'warphans' was one of the most proactive campaigns that it orchestrated. *Woman To-day* decided to adopt 100 Chinese 'warphans' and asked its readership to send money to adopt a child for themselves. The committee asked for 'five shillings a month or three pounds a year' to cover the cost of ensuring that the child was well looked after; 'owing to the very low cost of living in China', this 'very small sum' would cover food, shelter, education, and medical attention for one child. The committee included short profiles of six 'warphans' with this appeal which detailed their name, gender, birthplace, and age, and provided a short quotation from each child which gave an insight into the hardship that they had suffered. These short biographies were designed to elicit an emotional response: for example, the first profile was of a girl named Yu Lan Tuan who was fourteen years old and from Honan (Henan) Province. Yu Lan Tuan's misfortune had originated with a natural disaster as her village had been flooded by the Yellow River, after which her father had sent her to the government orphanage, as she could not stay in her destroyed home. The five other profiles, all young boys, fit a more traditional image of a 'warphan'; eight year-old Shang Hsiang Wu from Szechwan province and Feng Ling Lou from Henan province were both orphaned after their fathers joined the army, whereas eleven year-old Tzu Kuei Chen from Anhui province

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<sup>122</sup> Mitter, *China's War with Japan 1937 – 45: The Struggle for Survival*, p. 118.

<sup>123</sup> 'Introducing the Warphans', *Woman To-day* (March 1939), p. 20.

lost both of his parents in Japanese bombing raids, and he was subsequently sent to a government orphanage by his school teacher.<sup>124</sup>

Similarly, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* also published an article which contained the stories of twelve Chinese 'warphans' following the same structure as the *Woman To-day* article. For example, the article told the upsetting stories of children like thirteen-year-old Pei Ju Chu, who watched as her house was burned down and her mother was abducted by Japanese troops in Jianxi, and Chang Hsu Lo, whose father went to fight at the front and whose aunt was killed by a bombing. The quote which accompanied Chang Hsu Lo's profile emphasised the isolation felt by many warphans; he said that he had 'stayed there alone, with no-one to care for me'. Similarly, Yu Hsun Tai from Anhui, after losing both parents, expressed that he had 'no other person to look after me'. Perhaps the most emotional story in this article was that of twelve-year-old Yu Fang, who, although happy in the government orphanage, desperately wanted to see his mother, 'who was taken and killed by the Japanese soldiers'. However, he did not 'understand that he will not see his mother again' and expected her to come back at any moment.<sup>125</sup>

*Woman To-day* provided a follow up article after the initial call for sponsors which was presented as a great success. A few cases were provided to demonstrate the interest shown in the financial adoption of the 'warphans', including one person who adopted a 'warphan' through the CMF, despite having already 'adopted' an entire family in China through another organisation. This unnamed individual reasoned that 'five shillings is such a small amount, but I want it to be a personal adoption. I want to send gifts to my 'Warphan' and write to him.' In another case, five women who worked together in an office sponsored a young Chinese boy after hearing Charlotte Haldane speak at a meeting, while a branch of the Association of Women Clerks and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>125</sup> 'Écoutez-les !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1939), p. 15.

Secretaries (AWCS) sponsored a 'warphan' together. The representative of the AWCS who visited the offices of *Woman To-day* also assured the CMF that the Union would be sure to sponsor more Chinese orphans: 'Yes, the executive have taken the matter up, so you need not worry'. It was a source of pride for the committee that it was not just women who were interested in sponsoring 'warphans', but men and girls too.

'It is well known in this country the authorities do not encourage men to adopt children, but our committee does. We do not mind who adopts a "Warphan"; from the lowest to the highest paid worker. We would not refuse the Prime Minister, nor his wife'.<sup>126</sup>

One story stood out amongst the others in the article; a male sponsor wrote to the CMF that he wanted 'to adopt a 'Warphan'. A girl, if you have one; I suppose all the chubby boys and pretty girls have been taken'. The CMF found a young girl for him, 'whose face portrayed the suffering she had gone through'. She was a traditional 'warphan', as her parents had been killed by the Japanese army, and her only brother had 'kissed her, sent her to the orphanage, and joined the army'. When the sponsor was personally handed the photograph of his 'warphan', he responded, 'she's 13 years old. In this country a parent would be waiting until their children are 14, so that the money they earn will swell the family pool. This Chinese girl will have a better chance in life'.<sup>127</sup>

The 'warphans' adoption campaign was unlike anything that the CMF had done in any of their other campaigns; it allowed members of the British public who were not CMF members to contribute their money directly to the people who needed it the most. Instead of donating money to an abstract cause which did not allow people to see where their money was being used, sponsoring a Chinese orphan allowed individual donors to track the well-being of the child or children they sponsored, employing innovative ways to participate in charitable causes. The interwar period

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<sup>126</sup> 'Here are the "Warphans"', *Woman To-day* (April 1939), p. 15.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

saw the foundation of child sponsorship charities, with Save the Children first using this model to alleviate the hunger suffered by children as a result of the blockade of Germany towards the end of World War One.<sup>128</sup> Save the Children represented children in their appeals as ‘objects of innate pathos’ and ‘extra-national figures... entirely removed from questions of nationality or politics’.<sup>129</sup> Its early leaders fostered the myth that their child sponsorship campaigns ‘existed beyond self-interest, political concerns, and international diplomacy’ to arouse humanitarian sympathy among the British public, a tactic which the CMF deployed in its campaign for the ‘Warphans’.<sup>130</sup> The ‘Warphans’ campaign was not out of place with many other humanitarian campaigns which focused on aiding children in warzones, but it was an entirely new way for the CMF to engage the public.<sup>131</sup> It placed CMF campaigning at the forefront of innovation in humanitarian work in the interwar period; although the committee were not the first to deploy child sponsorship as a means of raising money for afflicted populations, their input no doubt helped to popularise this form of international charity.

The CMF’s Chinese campaign demonstrated a desire by the committee to broaden its horizons beyond the borders of Europe and to acknowledge the suffering faced by civilians under the pressures of war in Asia. The campaign still only covered the impact of war on women and children, although, for the first time, the explicit plight of children took a greater place than in any campaign previously. The CMF fetishized the Chinese women they wrote about in their articles, presenting them and their heritage as traditional and representing a different type of civilisation, set apart from the groups inherent Eurocentrism. By highlighting the traditional image of Chinese

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<sup>128</sup> See Ellen Boucher, ‘Cultivating Internationalism: Save the Children Fund, Public Opinion, and the Meaning of Child Relief’, in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (eds.) *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2011).

<sup>129</sup> Emily Baughan, ‘Every Citizen of Empire Implored to Save the Children!’ Empire, Internationalism, and the Save the Children Fund in Inter-war Britain’, *Historical Research*, Vol. 86, No. 231 (2013), p. 124.

<sup>130</sup> Emily Baughan and Julianio Fiori, ‘Save the Children, the Humanitarian Project, and the Politics of Solidarity: Reviving Dorothy Buxton’s Vision’, *Disasters*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2015), p. 130.

<sup>131</sup> For further discussion of the origins and history of child sponsorship initiatives, see Brad Watson, ‘The origins of international child sponsorship’, *Development in Practice*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (2015), pp. 867 – 879.



women as 'dainty' and submissive, the CMF was establishing a link between those women and the new Chinese woman who had fought for her place in modern society which relied heavily on colonial discourses which were still prevalent in Western Europe in the period. The legitimacy of intervention by Western women in non-western issues has been questioned by scholars of colonial history, as has the claim that women share 'a common experience of oppression', a point which is central to CMF coverage on China, although the impact of war on Chinese women and children is emphasised as devastating and unique.<sup>132</sup> The CMF's Chinese campaign was indicative of a well-meaning but stifled imperialist culture, which often utilised outdated stereotypes in the course of its activism.

In addition, Charlotte Haldane's solo trip to China on behalf of the CMF also set this campaign apart from the others mentioned in this chapter. Haldane, without any companions, travelled extensively in China, gaining first-hand knowledge of the situation and collecting information necessary for the exceptional 'warphan' campaign. Although the campaign to aid Chinese orphans employed innovative ways to involve members in the campaign, we cannot further track how successful this campaign was in real terms because of the heightening international tensions and the subsequent outbreak of World War Two; as the 'warphan' campaign was only launched in 1939, it was quickly swept to aside in favour of practical advice for readers when war broke out across Europe.

## **Conclusion**

The main goal of the CMF was to confront, through aid from the Comintern and its own membership, the causes and consequences of militarism, war, and fascism. The

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<sup>132</sup> Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, 'Women in the Chinese Patriarchal System', in Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers (eds.), *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape* (London: Zedd Books, 1994), p. 15.

three campaigns examined in this chapter are the best examples of the CMF's work towards achieving this goal; other international campaigns of note include the CMF's work on the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and in defence of the Soviet Union. However, these issues have a much smaller source base from which to draw conclusions and CMF campaigns on the Spanish Civil War, Nazi Germany, and Japanese aggression in China are better examples of how the CMF employed diverse tactics to protest fascist injustices within its means. They also demonstrate that the group was consistently encouraging its membership to engage on a personal level to their campaigns, and on some occasions were successful enough to encourage non-members to contribute.

These campaigns are also useful because they demonstrate how the CMF viewed women's place in society. The group's consistent dichotomisation of women as either masculine fighters or feminine mothers show that the CMF expected many women to fit into clearly defined roles, and when anti-fascist female fighters were also mothers, motherhood was expected to take precedence over their roles in the militia. Women were expected to take part in revolutionary movements and activism by the CMF while also remaining in traditional hierarchies, which the CMF tended to reinforce, consciously or subconsciously. How the CMF presented motherhood in its journals will be expanded upon in the chapter five of this thesis, but these campaigns are useful for showing that motherhood was a major motivator for the leaders of the group when it came to presenting international events to its members. Women who held the dual roles of mother and fighter were something to emulate, the ideal image of the new woman. However, this tendency to dichotomise women's roles was flawed, because it ignored women who were childless, by choice or design, assumed that all women possessed maternal instincts that would help them to relate to the suffering of others, and neglected those women who could not, or did not, want to fight.



## Chapter Six

### **The *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme's***

#### **Periodicals: *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale***

The CMF relied heavily on journals as a means of disseminating their ideals and spreading information on their campaigns. Journals in the interwar period were important for influencing how readers perceived events through certain lenses, as they 'played a significant role in setting the agenda for public and private discussion, and in providing interpretive frameworks through which readers made sense of the world'.<sup>1</sup> The periodical *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, which was published by the French section, had the largest circulation of any CMF publication by a large margin, with 140,000 copies sold monthly in 1937.<sup>2</sup> The German language paper, *Die Frau*, had the second largest circulation with 10,000 copies sold a month.<sup>3</sup> The Italian paper, *La Voce Della Donne* had a circulation of 2,000 copies a month: 1,500 for Italian émigrés living in France, and 500 clandestinely sent into Italy on 'Bible paper'.<sup>4</sup> The 'coordination of all this press' was a concern for the executive committee of the CMF, as its national sections published a large number of periodicals monthly, with some national sections publishing multiple journals concurrently. The CMF executive committee wanted each periodical to have a 'national character' which appealed to women individually by acknowledging national differences, but thought that for 'important international questions, it is indispensable that articles follow a general line'. The international executive committee subsequently complained that they had been 'harassed by desperate appeals for help' from national committees who had set

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Bingham, 'Enfranchisement, Feminism and the Modern Woman: Debates in the British Popular Press, 1918-1939', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds.) *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918 – 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> 'Rapport du Comité national Français : Assemblée plénière du comité mondial des femmes', 25 – 27 May 1935, Pandor, 543\_2\_2, Doc. 32, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> 'Rapport du Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme', 25 February 1937, Pandor, 543\_2\_21, Doc. 1, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> 'Le rassemblement mondial des femmes et les taches du comité italien', 25 and 26 May 1935, Pandor, 495\_4\_449a, Doc. 71, p. 5.

up monthly periodicals without giving 'much attention to their resources'.<sup>5</sup> For the CMF 'the financial difficulties were... heavier than the political difficulties' as the group felt that they could overcome political obstacles while financial issues were much more difficult to solve.<sup>6</sup>

While it is unclear exactly how *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* was distributed beyond the committee itself, the British journal, *Woman To-day*, was sold in the prominent radical bookshop Collet's, which had branches in London, Manchester, Cardiff and Glasgow, in addition to being sold by local sections of the committee. The target audience of the committee's journals was primarily CMF members and working-class women, although these women were not always engaged with politics. This was reflected in the content of the journals: in each edition, there were articles which eschewed politics altogether for stereotypically feminine topics. However, some of these articles, particularly those on fashion and beauty, seemed to be written for bourgeois women as they ignored the financial costs of certain activities which would be largely inaccessible for the working-class.

The CMF utilised its periodicals to inform its audience on the committee's international campaigns, with many articles covering the CMF's work in Spain, Germany, China and the Soviet Union. However, the two periodicals examined in this chapter, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* and *Woman To-day*, were also concerned with issues faced by women in their own national contexts. These articles offer a valuable insight into how the organisation covered feminist concerns relating to women's rights in France and Britain. This chapter will discuss how the CMF presented women's political and social rights in national contexts, including the struggle for women's suffrage in France and attacks on women's right to work generally. Further, an exploration of how the CMF presented traditionally feminine

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

pursuits will allow us to understand how an inherently political periodical attempted to cater to all sections of its readership. Following the example of national newspapers in the aftermath of the legalisation of suffrage in Britain, CMF journals consistently translated political topics 'into the language of the domestic and the familial, in a bid to reach women perceived to be immune to appeals to party'.<sup>7</sup> The extent to which the CMF expected that their readership as a homogenous group would respond better to articles which utilised traditional portrayals of femininity rather than invoking the image of the 'New Woman' prominent on the left in the interwar period is an interesting and contradictory aspect of the CMF's ideology which merits exploration.<sup>8</sup>

### **Universal Suffrage in France**

The campaign for women's suffrage before the First World War was the great unifier of feminist activists; the exclusion of women from the franchise 'highlighted the extent to which women shared common interests that could cut across class, religious, political, and national differences and raised the possibility of the development of a 'universal sisterhood'.<sup>9</sup> However, June Hannam has argued that 'the size, activity, and militancy of suffrage movements in England... dwarfed French efforts' which has often persuaded 'contemporaries and historical opinion of the relative unimportance of French suffragism'.<sup>10</sup> In addition, French feminists were determined to 'maintain the Republic and the social stability it represented' and wanted to avoid public demonstrations, which made the French suffrage movement appear less dynamic than its English-speaking counterparts. Charles Sowerwine has argued that French women sought to 'remain women' in their quest for the vote, which meant avoiding

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<sup>7</sup> Bingham, 'Enfranchisement, Feminism and the Modern Woman', p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> See Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-53* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: 'at the crossroads of several interlocking identities', p. 550.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 544.

violence, instead hoping simply 'to influence men in positions of power'.<sup>11</sup> In addition, British women had been given the vote in 1928, while French women remained excluded from contributing to the political process which created a disconnect between feminist activists on either side of the channel. The unequal acquisition of suffrage across Europe largely dissipated 'the common bond of political powerlessness' among women, and as such, universal suffrage for their sisters across the channel was not much of a concern for British women activists.<sup>12</sup> This, combined with the less dynamic suffrage movement, has created the illusion of a lack of French suffrage activism, both before and after the First World War.

However, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* did carry articles on the topic of women's suffrage. Women's suffrage bills were passed in the French Chamber of Deputies multiple times in the interwar period but were always ultimately rejected by the Senate. Siân Reynolds has argued that Radical politicians were concerned that women's votes would be influenced by Catholic priests, while June Hannam has stated that Republicans were concerned that women 'might wish to restore the monarchy', both of which would undermine Republican principles and threaten the foundations of the French state.<sup>13</sup> However, this argument was not convincing enough to sway right-wing parties from the belief that 'a woman's place was out of politics' either.<sup>14</sup> As such, women's suffrage in France was never really considered as a priority for French male politicians, although some parties on the left claimed to support the cause of women's suffrage. The French political establishment, then, fused the debate about how women's votes could potentially undermine Republican

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<sup>11</sup> Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Society and the Making of the Republic*, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Siân Reynolds, 'Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France', in Siân Reynolds (ed.), *Women, State, and Revolution: Essays on Power and Gender in Europe Since 1789* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986), p. 105; June Hannam, *Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, 'Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France', p. 105.

principles with the origins of the Republic itself, excluding women's contribution to the state almost entirely from its narrative.

Although it can be argued that a dedicated suffrage movement did not really exist in France after the First World War, women's activists of all political persuasions continued to espouse a desire for universal suffrage, although it was not necessarily the primary feature of their activism; Karen Offen has argued that French feminists in this period were proponents of 'relational' feminism, which took the family as the 'basic socio-political unit of the nation-state' and 'stressed the rights of women as *women*'.<sup>15</sup> French feminists emphasised their 'difference' as 'legitimising grounds for their participation in the public sphere', invoking the figure of the Virgin Mary 'as mother, an epitome of autonomy, duty, and obligation'.<sup>16</sup> They believed that women's 'motherly' characteristics should be employed to 'reform the society beyond the household'. For Offen, the actions of French feminists in the interwar period can be categorised as

'political responses by actors who held no formal political power, except in so far as they could sway public opinion, within a pervasive, pronatalist, nationalist, and anti-individualist climate of opinion, hostile to and apprehensive about the 'egotism' that seemed intrinsic to demands for enhanced legal, political and economic rights for women as individuals'.<sup>17</sup>

French bourgeois feminists and their concerns often reflected the pronatalist discourse which had grown in France, particularly after the devastation of World War One.<sup>18</sup> However, not all the French women who may have been expected to support universal suffrage did so. Irene Juliot-Curie and Suzanne Lacore, two of the three

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<sup>15</sup> Karen Offen, 'Body politics: women, work and the politics of motherhood in France, 1920 – 1950', in Bock and Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare State 1880s – 1950s*, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Pnina Werbner, 'Political Motherhood and the Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activism and the Transformation of the Public Sphere' in Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (eds.) *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 225

<sup>17</sup> Offen, 'Body politics: women, work and the politics of motherhood in France, 1920 – 1950', p. 144.

<sup>18</sup> For further on the pronatalist current in France between the wars see Marie-Monique Huss, 'Pronatalism in the Interwar Period in France', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1990), pp. 39-68 and Geoff Read, "'Citizens Useful to their Country and to Humanity": the Convergence of Eugenics and Pro-Natalism in Interwar French Politics, 1918 – 1940', *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2012), pp. 373 – 397.



socialist women ministers whom Léon Blum appointed to his Popular Front government in 1936 were concerned that if they enfranchised women en masse, they might vote 'the wrong way' and elect a right-wing government.<sup>19</sup>

During the municipal elections, held between 5 and 12 May 1935, the CMF published a pamphlet entitled '*La femme doit voter!*' (Woman must vote!), a phrase which was a 'constant refrain' in French feminist literature about 'universal' rights.<sup>20</sup> The pamphlet lamented that,

'Despite your will, parliament refused to grant you the right to vote in the next Municipal Elections...You, whose husbands and children are threatened by war. You do not have the opportunity to express your opinion!'<sup>21</sup>

The pamphlet was oriented to working women, housewives, rural workers, and female intellectuals, and argued that women must be able to vote to prevent proto-fascist politicians in France from reducing women's role in society to 'boiling potatoes and raising children'. The pamphlet argued that women wanted the vote to defend 'bread, freedom and peace' and implored 'men and women of heart' and 'fathers and mothers' to participate in the campaign to achieve the vote.<sup>22</sup>

*Femmes dans l'action mondiale* featured a column in March 1935 which was penned by Bernadette Cattaneo following the defeat of a universal suffrage bill in the Senate. Cattaneo discussed the reasons that the French government continued to reject women's suffrage; she argued that some pretended that women were 'lacking political education', while others believed that women would 'thoughtlessly' opt for 'the physical advantages of the candidate [rather] than for his valour or his political sympathies'.<sup>23</sup> This was also common in the British press after women had received the vote, as some newspapers assumed that women's 'political preferences would

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<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 161.

<sup>20</sup> Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, p. 487.

<sup>21</sup> '*La femme doit voter !*' (1935), Bernadette Cattaneo papers, 1-BC-2(F), p. 1, CHSVS.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Le droit de vote aux femmes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 8.

reflect [their] superficiality'. They believed that women may have a 'supposed unwillingness, out of sexual jealousy, to vote for their fellow women' and that women had an 'apparent inability to appreciate the gravity of their civic responsibility'.<sup>24</sup>

According to Cattaneo, other opponents of women's suffrage in France envisioned 'the worst consequences for the household [and] feminine morality'. She also criticised the left for its perceived failure to act on the suffrage question; she acknowledged that a 'great fear of a vote for the right' had made 'numerous elements of the left' hesitant to act on the matter.<sup>25</sup> Cattaneo stressed that no argument would convince the CMF that women should not be allowed to vote on the same terms as their male counterparts: 'we are asking [for] women's eligibility without any restriction and absolutely the same rights as men in universal suffrage'. The Soviet Union was lauded as a pioneer of universal suffrage because 'millions of women [had] voted since the first days of the Revolution', and Cattaneo believed that French politicians could learn lessons from this.<sup>26</sup>

A 'family vote' was one proposal made by French politicians that CMF women rejected in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*. The 'family vote' would introduce 'proportional voting' that would allow every household to vote as one, which meant the enfranchisement of women and children, although in this case, children would vote 'vicariously, through their parents'.<sup>27</sup> Because France was perceived as 'one large family' by the right-wing, it was argued that the 'family vote' would 'strengthen each of the basic units of society by granting an additional vote to heads of family'. In addition, right-wing politicians believed that a 'family vote' 'would compensate the increased weight given to single individuals at elections by giving additional voting

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Beers, 'A timid disbelief in the equality to which lip-service is constantly paid': gender, politics and the press between the wars', in Beers and Thomas (eds.) *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars*, p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> Bernadette Cattaneo, 'Le droit de vote aux femmes', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Huss, 'Pronatalism in the Interwar Period in France', p. 65.

rights to Heads of Family'.<sup>28</sup> The CMF argued that in 'the great majority' of households a 'communion of ideas' existed between partners, and as such it would be impracticable and wrong to 'seriously talk about placing women under guardianship' and to make husbands the 'absolute sponsor' of their wives. Besides, this proposal did not really tackle the demands of women's political equality with men. In fact, women's political inferiority would actually be reinforced with such a proposal. There were also concerns about who would speak for widows and young single women who were not married but who still had 'interests to defend [and] ideas to emit'. They specifically linked women's economic contribution to the nation with the right to vote:

'What we want is that the worker, the employee, the civil servant who has had 2% of their wages withheld under the *décrets-lois* have the right to express... their vote and show their absolute opposition to such proceedings by who they elect!'<sup>29</sup>

The French section of the CMF viewed the struggle for universal suffrage as a step on the path to women's emancipation. It would allow women to participate in political decision-making on the same terms as men and provide an official outlet for women's opinions, but the vote was not necessarily the overarching goal for French socialist feminists as it was for British feminists before World War One. They were encouraged by 'socialist rhetoric of equality to demand rights for themselves' and were committed to the principle of women's suffrage as a result. However, the suffrage movement was often seen as 'a competitor for the allegiance of working-class women' by socialist parties, and some socialist women tried to 'sabotage feminist efforts' in order to remain in control of proletarian women.<sup>30</sup> The CMF thought that the vote would provide women with the opportunity to agitate for better living and working conditions to improve women's position in society more generally.

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<sup>28</sup> Magali Sudda, 'Gender, Fascism and the Right-Wing in France between the Wars: The Catholic Matrix', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2012), p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> 'Nous voulons le droit de vote', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April – May 1939), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Hannam, 'International Dimensions of Women's Suffrage: 'at the crossroads of several interlocking identities', p. 546 – 547.

## Women's Right to Work

Threats to women's right to work were consistently made in the interwar period; attacks were made rhetorically in the press and legally through the active legislation against the inclusion of certain women in governmental and civil service positions. With demobilisation after World War One, shifts in social class, the uncertain direction of the feminist movement, and women 'newly come into the larger world', women's work became 'indeterminate, insecure, and subject to changing legislation'.<sup>31</sup> The French and British popular press deployed a rhetoric which 'insisted so adamantly yet so futilely' on the division of labour along gender lines, 'with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as *maitresse de maison* and mother-educator'.<sup>32</sup> Attacks were often levied against married women in particular, and at one point, the French government banned married women from joining its civil service, but did not force already employed married women to quit. The British government did not legislate against women's right to work, but the potential that it could happen was ever present, and many women activists were concerned that their government would follow the German example of excluding women from certain professions to satisfy some on the far-right.<sup>33</sup>

One reason for these attacks on women's right to work in France was a strong pronatalist current which had existed from the early twentieth century and which presented women's true place as in the home as a mother. Even some feminists

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<sup>31</sup> Laurel Forster, 'The Essay Series and Feminist Debate: Controversy and Conversation about Women and Work in Time and Tide', Catherine Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918 – 1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 334.

<sup>32</sup> Offen, 'Body politics: women, work and the politics of motherhood in France, 1920 – 1950', p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> Hatton and Bailey have penned two articles statistically analysing the participation of women in the workforce across Britain, T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, 'Female Labour Force Participation in Interwar Britain', *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1988), pp. 695 – 718; and T.J. Hatton and R.E. Bailey, 'Household Labour and Women's Work in Interwar Britain', *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1993), pp. 229 – 256.

believed that women had a unique role to play in the home; for example, in 1910, the novelist Marcelle Tinayre wrote in *La Française* that

‘woman is made, above all, for love, marriage, maternity, the education of children, the government of the household, and not for heavy labour or vast responsibilities...France could probably get along without politicians, but not without mothers of families’.<sup>34</sup>

Offen has argued that ‘issues concerning the emancipation of French women, including their employment and reproductive practices, were inextricably intertwined with an impassioned debate over the shape and future strength of the French national community.’ The need for a strong, healthy population to act as a barrier to a ‘resurgent and resentful Germany’ in the future was a major concern for politicians and civilians alike, which had the potential to negatively impact the fight for women’s rights.<sup>35</sup> To some extent, the CMF seems to have accepted traditional expectations of women as mothers who preferred to remain in the home and take a dominant role in housework and childcare if the economic situation allowed. The relationship between the pro-maternity rhetoric commonly found in *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l’action mondiale* and their ardent defence of women’s right to work, despite, or indeed because of their potential as mothers, will be explored in this section.

Whether the full exclusion of women from public service employment was ever a true threat in these two countries is debatable. However, campaigns in some sections of the popular press had loudly advocated for the removal of certain women from employment, and the CMF in both France and Britain reacted to the threat accordingly. *Woman To-day* consistently published spreads which argued that women should not be discouraged from entering employment which was not traditionally feminine. In a photo-essay entitled ‘Woman’s Place? – Everywhere!’, women were shown in various jobs, including as factory workers, typists, dancers, fisherwomen and nurses, as well as traditionally feminine roles (mothers) and traditionally masculine ones (scientists). Captions accompanied the photographs

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<sup>34</sup> Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, p. 383.

<sup>35</sup> Offen, ‘Body politics: women, work and the politics of motherhood in France, 1920 – 1950’, p. 140.

which lauded the advances of women in various workplaces, including the fame achieved by some female scientists and the fisherwomen who had 'struck for better wages'. The periodical argued that, as workers, women had learned that 'progress and strength come through organisation' and that 'they [would] pass [these lessons] on to their children'.<sup>36</sup> *Woman To-day* did promote the emancipatory potential of work for women, linking women's right to work with the concept of progress and presenting it as a prerequisite of a modern, emancipated woman.

At the same time, the expectation that women would, at some point in their lives, become a mother was ever present in this discourse. There was an expectation that mothers should prepare their daughters for the modern workforce, regardless of whether they would marry or not. Mothers, whose role had historically included the education of children, were still expected by the CMF to perform this function despite moves towards women's emancipation. Women's role as mother was still the most important that they could hold because they were responsible for socialising the next generation of workers. Monica Pearson, a journalist who worked primarily for the Sunday newspaper *Reynold's News*, argued that daughters needed 'training, congenial work and good prospects just as much as your son, whether she marries or not'. Pearson provided practical advice in preparing young women for employment: first, she stated that the work chosen must 'not only develop her natural talents', but also engage her with 'a certain amount of training and technical knowledge'. She then offered suggestions for work suitable for young women: she described domestic work as 'drab' but recommended it if the girl could tackle it 'from a scientific point of view'. She argued, for example, that if a domestic worker could add to a knowledge of cookery a knowledge of 'food values' she could qualify as a dietician, or if she became interested in electricity, she should could combine that with housework to become a 'demonstrator for a gas or electrical company'. Pearson also advocated taking an

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<sup>36</sup> 'Woman's Place? – Everywhere!', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), pp. 8 – 9.

interest in electricity more generally, as 'the future prospects of anyone who makes it a speciality... are distinctly promising.'<sup>37</sup>

The rapidly expanding beauty industry also provided opportunities for young women to enter into employment, as Pearson noted the lack of 'really efficient assistants' in hairdressing because of the time it took to train.<sup>38</sup> She suggested that practitioners of this work visited clients in their own homes to carry out the treatments. She did worry that it was 'not so feasible now that electrical equipment plays a larger part, but there are still possibilities for the enterprising girl, who can save a little capital.' She also advocated that women enter dressmaking, clerical work, civil service work, nursing and sales positions, as well as roles which would see women engaged in outdoor work, such as kennel maids, gardeners or farmers. However, she warned against exploitation from 'sharks', employers who used girls and women for cheap labour without providing the training that had been promised. Pearson warned that 'the girl with real talent is just as liable to be exploited as her less brilliant sister'.<sup>39</sup>

*Femmes dans l'action mondiale* regularly published a '*tribune libre*', an opinion column that discussed the problems faced by working women in France. It informed readers on the tangible threat that fascism posed to women's right to work, with the dual purpose of educating readers on different careers available to women. For example, Luce Langevin, a scientist and the daughter in law of Paul Langevin, interviewed the organic chemist, Pauline Ramart. Langevin used Ramart's role as only the second female chair of the Sorbonne as evidence of progress towards the CMF's goal of 'equality of access to professions and functions of state'. The Ramart interview had two purposes: first, Ramart poured extensive praise on the CMF and expressed a feeling of encouragement 'every day by the results you get' in enlightening women who 'do not yet see the danger' of Nazism. Second, it allowed

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<sup>37</sup> Monica Pearson, 'Launching your Daughter', *Woman To-Day* (March 1937), p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Emphasis Pearson's.

<sup>39</sup> Pearson, 'Launching your Daughter', p. 4.

the CMF to promote Popular Front strategies; for example, when she was asked what she thought of the growing 'rapprochement' between intellectual and manual workers, Ramart replied that she saw 'no fundamental difference between the workers, who [had been] artificially separated' into the two categories.<sup>40</sup>

Motherhood again was a major theme in the debate about women's right to work. The opinion columns in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* often stressed how women's need to work had the potential to impact the family and children in positive and negative ways. For example, Ramart stated that she was in favour of women's right to work and that it was not 'incompatible with family life', but added the qualifier that it was essential that women took 'care of the development, both physical and intellectual, of her children' above everything.<sup>41</sup> Another column stressed the pain of the dual burden of working and still being entirely responsible for housework and childcare on women; in this case, a woman who was employed as a nurse explained the minute details of her everyday life, which demonstrated the difficulty of reconciling motherhood with a full-time job. The nurse's day began at 5 in the morning, when she lit 'the fire, prepared the breakfasts, the clothes [and] the lunches'. She explained that there was little difference between home and work for her: she had simply 'changed her master' from her family to her boss.<sup>42</sup> At home, her husband and children demanded her time and effort while at work the doctor took on the same role, which gave her the feeling of never truly being in control of her actions.<sup>43</sup>

The nurse's everyday life left her with limited time available for herself; after a sixteen hour work day during which she did not stop working for longer than ten minutes ('Does the eight-hour day exist somewhere?'), at nine in the evening she

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<sup>40</sup> Luce Langevin, 'Le droit au travail : Ce que nous dit Pauline Ramart, deuxième femme admise à une chaire en Sorbonne', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June – July 1935), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> 'Tribune libre de "Femme" : Travailleuses et mères', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (July 1936), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> For information on nursing in France in this period, see Katrin Schultheiss, *Bodies and Souls: Politics and the Professionalization of Nursing in France, 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).



could take a small amount of time for herself, but even then, she was consumed with concerns about finances, 'family quarrels', and issues at work. This column demonstrated the realities of being a working-class mother in the 1930s, with no choice but to work outside the home to support her family. In her opinion, 'no profession requires more care than that of a mother' and she strongly emphasised that motherhood was the most important, most fulfilling job she could hold; her 'beautiful children' were the 'only pure joy and justification of my hard life'. The shared experience of motherhood and the dual burden that the CMF emphasised was expressed clearly when the author said that she often thought of the fact that 'so many women in the vast world carry... all this human pain... with me in the darkness'. Despite the portrayal of motherhood as a thankless but positive job, the author determined that women who worked while taking on a traditional role in the home were important, as 'it is good to be a mother and to be something more, to have a social role and a family role.'<sup>44</sup>

In another example of the portrayal of the dual burden, journalist Etienne Constant conducted an interview with a young woman named Catherine Mollard which appeared in the journal. Mollard was forced to work as a glassblower to support her two younger sisters. Constant asked the sisters about their opinion on women's right to work; the two younger sisters agreed that they would prefer to work and make a good living rather than to rely on Catherine's salary, while Catherine was less enthusiastic about it. Constant asked Catherine whether she had ever considered returning to the home instead of working, to which Catherine responded, 'How can we live without working?' The question of how a fascist government would impact women's work was present here too. Constant asked the middle sister, Madeleine, if she knew that 'if the fascists succeed in doing what they want in France, they will drive you... out of the shop [that she wanted to open with her fiancé] because you will

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

occupy the place of men?' Madeleine was shocked by this and argued that if this became the case that the boutique would not pay enough for them to live. In addition, she was firm in her assertion that she was not 'an idler' and she did 'not want to live at the expense of [her] husband'.<sup>45</sup> This interview demonstrated two opposing viewpoints of women on their right to work: Catherine Mollard had no choice but to work to support her sisters, while the emancipatory potential of work was demonstrated by the youngest sister Dédé and the middle sister Madeleine. It also served a political purpose, as it explained that fascism in France would pose a threat to employed women, to encourage them to use the influence that they had to prevent such a takeover.

From the earliest editions of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* in 1934, full page spreads were published which chronicled public efforts to remove women from governmental and civil service jobs; for example, in October and November 1934, the periodical reported that some of the women who worked for the *Société des transports en commun de la région Parisienne* (referred to as the T.C.R.P. in the article) and the *Postes, télégraphes et téléphones* (P.T.T.) were facing unemployment due to the replacement of the tram system with bus lines; one of the articles described a female conductor, 'red with indignation', who had received a letter which read

'Madam, we regret to inform you that the replacement of the tramways by bus lines has the inevitable result of rendering the female staff employed on the trams unusable by the Company'.<sup>46</sup>

According to the article, such brazen attacks on women's employment had created an atmosphere of solidarity among Parisian transport workers and that more attacks could further unite workers against their employer's exploitation. The female conductors were determined that they 'must not surrender by accepting the reform' and regularly held meetings 'in the depots and throughout the Paris region'. They

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<sup>45</sup> Etienne Constant, 'Le droit au travail et le droit à la vie', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April – May 1935), pp. 4 – 5.

<sup>46</sup> 'Avec les receveuses des T.C.R.P sur les bolidés', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (October 1934), p. 3.

were determined not to be halted in their protests against their dismissal; their spokesperson emphasised 'if one hesitates, if one is ready to capitulate and accept the lesser evil, then we are defeated in advance; but if, on the contrary, we take the offensive, if all the exploited workers of the same employer agree to lead the struggle for victory without fail, it is quite another thing'.<sup>47</sup>

France in the interwar period was rife with industrial unrest and strikes were common; as we have seen, Bernadette Cattané was a prominent strike organiser and by extension the CMF believed that women's participation in strikes was crucial for their economic emancipation. An edition of the French periodical dedicated to the efforts of the '*grévistes*' who went on strike from May to August 1936 was one of only two topics which was featured as a special edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale*, the other being the Spanish Civil War. The origin of these strikes has been traced to a strike at the Bréguet aviation factory on 1 May 1936, which Cattané played a prominent role in as an organiser. Strikes occurred intermittently across France throughout May, but it was from 2 June 1936 that the strikes truly spread, especially in the Paris region. 'Chocolate factories, printing works, building sites, locksmiths' and engineering factories, including the Renault plant at Billancourt, went on strike, while geographically, 'only three *départements* were left untouched' by strike action.<sup>48</sup> Even the formation of the Popular Front government under Léon Blum on 4 June 1936 did not stop the strikes; Julian Jackson has argued instead that the Popular Front victories in the first round of the 1936 election 'made action seem possible'. In addition, Popular Front candidates elected in municipal elections a year earlier often 'provided free provisions' to strikers, including Jacques Doriot's Saint-Denis municipality, which produced '130,000 free meals in fifteen days'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front: Defending Democracy, 1934 – 38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

*Femmes dans l'action mondiale* emphasised the role of women in these strikes as both workers and wives of male strikers and the impact that they had on the success of the movement. Siân Reynolds has argued that many historical accounts of women's participation in the strikes of 1936 in France suggest that women 'played mainly a supportive or passive role... bringing food to the factory gate for husband or son, or engaging in womanly pursuits like knitting to while away the time in an occupied factory'.<sup>50</sup> However, while the CMF represented wives and mothers in this way, it was not the most prominent image used in the journal of women in the strikes.

The periodical emphasised that the strikes in which women workers were involved had 'perfect discipline' with no alcohol permitted and communal kitchens established by workers to feed themselves.<sup>51</sup> The roles they played as strikers, fundraisers, activists, and wives were illustrated by the photographs which filled the periodical; *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* even offered female strikers an original photograph of a strike movement if she found herself in the journal as a souvenir to remember their participation by. However, as was the case with many of the topics the CMF concerned itself with, motherhood was presented as the primary reason that women should join strikes. One image of a mother holding a young baby was accompanied by the caption:

'The mother, proud and happy, embraces her baby. Not only did she give birth to him, but also, she fought for him, striking on the job, to ensure everything necessary to make this beautiful and sweet child a strong and happy man. What joy on the baby's face. For long days he waited for his mother... and never was his kiss so sweet as it is today'.<sup>52</sup>

Women were not striking for better pay and working conditions for themselves, but for their children and potential future children. However, it is also evident that the CMF

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<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> 'Les mille visages de la grève', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> 'La grève a gagné toute la France et a touché toutes les industries', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 6.

expected that women would happily return to their 'main' role in the home after the strike was over, positioning women's work outside the home as less important than her work as a mother and wife.

The special edition on strikes also allowed the CMF to demonstrate its commitment to the workers' movement by emphasising their contribution to the strikes. The French section organised collections for the strikers 'throughout France', particularly citing the donation of the Foutenay-sous-Bois committee on the outskirts of Paris who had raised 300 francs for the cause, had served coffee to women on strike, and had decided to open a permanent office of collections for strikers.<sup>53</sup> The Suresnes, Vélizy, Levallois, Paray-Vieille-Poste and 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements* in Paris all offered practical help to solve 'serious problems' of organisation, including the preparation of *pot-au-feu* (beef stew) for strikers. The women of the Villejuif committee offered to donate 400 francs to a strike committee near them, and the Charonne and 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* committees provided strikers with 'good blankets' to use while they occupied factories overnight.<sup>54</sup> Further, CMF women contributed their oratorical skills to the strikes: photographs showed Maria Rabaté mixing with strikers at the Galeries Lafayette, and Madeleine Braun, communist activist and CMF member, giving a speech at an unnamed factory. These were just two of the examples that the CMF used to convince its readers that it had played a vital role in building and sustaining morale during the lengthy strikes.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, the CMF used its coverage of the strikes as an opportunity to promote women's membership of trade unions. 36.6% of women were 'economically active' in France in 1931, which had risen to 37.9% by 1946, but they only represented around 8% of trade union memberships in 1936.<sup>56</sup> The last two pages of the '*grévistes*'

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<sup>53</sup> 'Femmes grévistes !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p.2 and 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> 'Les mille visages de la grève', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Offen, 'Body politics: women, work and the politics of motherhood in France, 1920 – 1950', p. 142; Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, p. 119.

special edition were dedicated to a promotion of the CGT, which had only recently begun working with communist cadres again after the election of the Popular Front government. The CMF warned its readers not to forget that the victory of the strikers was 'only possible thanks... to the unified associations of the CGT.' and emphasised that women who worked in 'factories, offices, ateliers or the Civil Service' should organise themselves. The periodical pointed out that 'before, perhaps, [women] did not want to hear about trade unions', but, as they saw the power of organised strikes, they had begun to consider organising themselves for the betterment of working conditions and salaries.<sup>57</sup>

CMF journals largely presented questions surrounding women's right to work as positive, with *Woman To-day* encouraging women to seek out new forms of employment to develop their economic security. Women's absolute right to work was never in dispute for the CMF, even when employment was difficult and unfulfilling and remaining in the home would be preferable. Motherhood was utilised to create a sense of common experience between readers of CMF journals, but it was also largely accepted and even encouraged by the CMF that motherhood would be women's priority over employment. Even strike movements were presented as a step towards better working conditions for their children, rather than themselves. The CMF celebrated working women who had the double burden of also raising children; however, the committee still relied on traditional images of women which envisioned their main duty as mothers.

### **Advice for the Self**

Although CMF publications allowed women to voice their opinions on political issues from which they were still largely excluded, the group's journals portrayed women's

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<sup>57</sup> 'Tiens... c'est moi', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (June 1936), pp. 7 – 8.

interests outside of politics in a way which tended to emphasise their roles as housewives and beauty consumers. The interwar period 'saw a number of dramatic and subtle shifts in the ways in which women used adornment to represent themselves and engage in the modern era', which were indicative of women's negotiation of the new 'desirable and potentially transgressive feminine identities' which had become available after the First World War.<sup>58</sup> Leila Wimmer has argued that 'the development of mass consumer culture and commodities such as cosmetics and fashion had a destabilising effect on nineteenth-century cultural hierarchies', and offered women 'a language through which they could articulate new demands, concerns and desires' in a period when 'women's relationship to the civic, economic and 'social' public realm were under renegotiation'.<sup>59</sup> The CMF used the emancipatory potential of cosmetics, fitness, and motherhood in their periodicals to reflect an image of the 'modern woman'.

However, the actual intentions of the CMF are unclear; were they deliberately reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies, or were they were encouraging a destabilisation of these hierarchies through beauty culture? Laura Beers, in her examination of the British popular press in the interwar period, has argued that newspapers 'took for granted that women were less interested in political issues than men, and, consequently, focused on 'human interest' and fashion' stories, which could explain the decision made by the CMF to include traditionally feminine interests in their journals; they could have had a subconscious bias, absorbed from the popular press, that women were not as interested in political topics as men, and as such,

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<sup>58</sup> Barbara Green, 'Styling Modern Life: Introduction', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918 – 1939*, p.121.

<sup>59</sup> Leila Wimmer, 'Modernity, femininity and Hollywood Fashions: Women's Cinephilia in 1930s French Fan Magazines', *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (2014), p. 66.

some non-political topics had to be included in order to attract and maintain their readership.<sup>60</sup>

Beauty, fashion, motherhood, healthcare, and housewifery, including cooking and managing a household budget, were all topics that the CMF covered to cater to women's non-political interests. The image of women presented in these sections was largely feminine and maternal, with some acknowledgement of the perspective of working women, but with no mention of women who did not reflect the 'norm', such as women who did not have families. Further, these topics often clashed with the reality of the lives of the CMF's readership, who were largely working-class with a limited disposable income. This section covers the topics which concerned women themselves, including cosmetics culture, health, and fashion. In addition to the next section on advice for mothers, this will demonstrate how the CMF promoted and reinforced traditional notions of femininity in their periodicals.

Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska in her work on 'the making of a modern female body', identified that fashion, cosmetics and beauty products became a 'central feature of [the] flourishing mass consumer culture' which emerged in the West in the interwar period. She argued that 'a modern, actively cultivated body was an aspect of women's liberation, like emancipation, greater gender equality, and expanded employment opportunities'.<sup>61</sup> Sally Alexander similarly suggested that health and beauty products allowed women a freedom which was previously denied to them because of a lack of disposable income; Alexander argues that the

'nascent consumer industries of the interwar years offered young women workers the opportunity to fashion a glamorous and rebellious identity that

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<sup>60</sup> Beers, 'A Timid Disbelief in the Equality to which Lip-Service is Constantly Paid': Gender, Politics and the Press between the Wars', p. 131.

<sup>61</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'The making of a modern female body: beauty, health and fitness in interwar Britain', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), p. 300.



marked a break with childhood and distinguished them from the domestic worlds their mothers inhabited.<sup>62</sup>

A healthy, active female body became the 'prime signifier of modernity' and a 'marker of the disjuncture of this period from what had gone before'.<sup>63</sup>

New ways for young women to demonstrate their economic independence stimulated a 'democratisation' of women's consumer culture, which allowed working-class women in particular to utilise beauty and health products which had previously been the exclusive fare of the middle and upper classes.<sup>64</sup> In addition, cosmetics became a way for working-class women to assert their independence over their bodies, representing the moves towards women's emancipation made in this period. The CMF recognised the popularity of health and beauty amongst young women and saw an opportunity to expand their membership, identifying that beauty culture provided women with the ability to fashion a modern identity which fit with the group's image of its readers as independent workers. However, it could be the case that the opposite was true, and that the CMF were unthinkingly embracing the stereotypical idea that women should be concerned with their image not for themselves, but for the people around them.

In three of the four editions of *Woman To-day* published from September to December 1936, there was a page dedicated to beauty. The beauty advice pages in both *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* were generally targeted towards working-class women who did not have large sources of disposable income, often recommending the use of relatively cheap products that could be found in the home. However, the first article, 'A Beauty Talk... by Aline', opened by stating that the question which preoccupied working-class women the most was 'What can I do

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<sup>62</sup> Vicky Long and Hilary Marland, 'From Danger and Motherhood to Health and Beauty: Healthy Advice for the Factory Girl in Early Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2009), p. 474.

<sup>63</sup> Charlotte Macdonald, 'Body and Self: Learning to be Modern in 1920s-1930s Britain', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013), p. 270.

<sup>64</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 239.

to improve my appearance?', which demonstrated a distinct lack of awareness of the concerns of working-class women. The author argued that this question was not 'an idle one', as maintaining a good appearance was much more difficult for the working woman, 'for under the present system of employment, not only are the working conditions in factories against the maintaining of a good appearance, but as one grows older one finds that appearance counts with the employers in getting us a job'.<sup>65</sup>

A low income did not excuse neglecting one's looks in the opinion of beauty writers in *Woman To-day*; Alice Bolster argued that 'most writers on beauty issue their instructions with a sublime indifference to such questions as time or money', but this did not mean 'that the woman who had her work cut out to earn a living or run a home can afford to neglect herself'. She continued that if she was 'being sensible, [the woman worker] will value her appearance as highly as any reader of the more expensive fashion journals'.<sup>66</sup> Women who did not put effort into their appearances were portrayed by these articles as 'neglecting herself' and beauty experts often advocated that working women should wear at least a small amount of make-up daily to 'feel absolutely at her best'.<sup>67</sup> For example, *Woman To-day* stressed the importance of a good skincare regime, 'followed by a very little day cream and a dust of powder' which would keep the skin fresh 'for hours'.<sup>68</sup> In another article, the process of applying make-up was described as 'both restful and stimulating' and was framed as women's duty to apply. The author wrote:

'No woman need feel guilty about 'make-up'. It enhances natural beauty, leads to cleanly and more hygienic ways of living, and gives that good feeling which enables women to face, with confidence, the many problems of modern life, both at work and play. A woman owes a duty to herself and [her] neighbour to look and feel absolutely at her best'.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> 'A Beauty Talk... By Aline', *Woman Today* (September 1936), p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Alice Bolster, 'Make the Most of Yourself', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> 'As Others See You: A Monthly Guide to Beauty by Aline', *Woman To-Day* (October 1936), p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> 'A Beauty Talk... By Aline', p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> 'As Others See You: A Monthly Guide to Beauty by Aline', p. 5.

This example of a 'duty to beauty' was not a common theme in CMF periodicals but did appear from time to time. In another article, Leonora Gregory argued that women should wear cosmetics even though they represented the commercialist exploitation of women because they would avoid all aspects of beauty culture 'to the sorrow of those who have to look at us'.<sup>70</sup>

The editors of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* also provided beauty tips for working women which did not take much time to apply after a full day of work. The first beauty tip published in the journal concerned how 'to have a fresh face after work' and included applying gauze compresses and 'very hot herbal tea' to the face. After 'two or three minutes of this heat treatment', the reader was directed to apply egg white to their face with their fingers and leave the egg white on the face for 'ten or twenty minutes, making the room dark, if possible', before cleaning the face with warm water and applying cold compresses. This type of treatment was easy to fashion out of items commonly found in the home and took about 30 minutes to do, so did not impact too heavily on any leisure time a working woman might have. The goal of this treatment was make the face 'clear, without trace of the fatigues of the day' and to rectify the damage done to skin in the workplace.<sup>71</sup> The beauty page published two months later in May 1937 detailed how to make a steam bath at home for 'oily skin or [skin] spotted with blackheads' which would only take around 10 minutes to use.<sup>72</sup>

Debates over the use of cosmetics were not completely absent from CMF periodicals, however. Leonora Gregory, in an article entitled 'Lipsticks are Politics', likened those who derided cosmetics as 'artificial' to German fascists. She explained that 'it is not without significance that whereas make-up is frowned upon in Germany, lip-sticks are in great demand in the Soviet Union'. Gregory argued that Germany was 'anti-progressive [and] anti-scientific', which meant that most German citizens were

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<sup>70</sup> Leonora Gregory, 'Lipsticks are Politics', *Woman To-Day* (January 1939), p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1937), p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (May 1937), p. 17.

only able to experience 'a minimum share of what the world has to offer', and, as a result, were opposed to artificial means of enhancing beauty. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, wanted to utilise 'everything that nature and science can provide in order to improve the lot of all'.<sup>73</sup> This is the only time that cosmetics were presented as a way to express anti-fascist sentiment in any of the CMF's national periodicals and was a critique of attempts to forbid or dissuade women from using make-up. On the other hand, Gregory also warned of the commercialisation of cosmetics and considered whether it should impact the decision of working women to buy and wear them. She wrote that women had a 'natural desire to look [their] best' which capitalism had sought to 'exploit'. She set out a five-step plan which outlined the 'essence of beauty culture' to help women to avoid falling too deeply into the trap of beauty consumerism.<sup>74</sup>

One article, written by Joan Beauchamp, an anti-war activist and co-founder of the CPGB, took an especially negative view of women who wore make up. Beauchamp was scathing in her attack on women who regularly used cosmetics, and chastised 'even progressive papers' for catering to the cosmetics 'racket' which was only designed to 'lead us all up the garden and make profits out of us'. She even singled out *Woman To-day* as one such 'progressive paper' which 'devote themselves to giving advice on how to 'make up'', inadvertently giving publicity to the exploitative cosmetics industry.<sup>75</sup> Beauchamp was highly critical of the fact that working girls and women were spending what little extra money they had on cosmetics; she argued that 'oranges' and 'good soap' were cheaper than cosmetics and the 'consistent use' of soap 'with plenty of warm water does away with any need for mud packs, skin lotions, face creams and all the other rubbish out of which beauty specialists make a fat living'. Beauchamp also firmly believed that the woman who worked 'eight or nine

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<sup>73</sup> Gregory, 'Lipsticks are politics', p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> Joan Beauchamp, 'Should Women Make Up?', *Woman To-Day* (November 1937), p. 6.

hours a day and then does trade union or propaganda work' did not have the time to 'mess about' with cosmetics and lotions. She argued that a working woman had 'little enough time for recreation as it is and is not taken in by the story that to stand in front of a mirror dabbing stuff on her face is stimulating or restful', positioning women who used cosmetics as at odds with her image of a working woman.<sup>76</sup>

The editors of *Woman To-day* anticipated that there would be a strong reaction to the Beauchamp article and specifically asked for women's opinions on the piece, which they published the following month in a full-page spread. Of the four responses highlighted, one supported Beauchamp and two responded negatively to her article. The first response applauded the 'courage' it had taken *Woman To-day* to 'attack the beauty racket', while the second response argued that Beauchamp's belief that women activists did not have time to 'make up' was false, as 'when doing trade and propaganda work it is very important to look clean and well turned out'. The third response took Beauchamp to task because 'an occasional sixpennyworth of oranges will not do away with pale cheeks and ill health'. The writer made it clear that working women were aware that they were being exploited by cosmetics manufacturers, but also pointed out that they were also exploited by 'Milk Marketing Boards and their advertisers in everything we buy'. In this case, the answer was not less milk, but a fight for more milk and cheaper prices.<sup>77</sup>

The final response to the article worried that *Woman To-day* would 'degenerate into the usual women's paper', with articles on children, beauty, and cooking dominating the contents. The editors of *Woman To-day* felt that it was necessary to 'reassure' their readers that they had no intention of following the lead of other women's papers which only supplied articles on 'women's topics'. Instead, it reinforced its role as a 'forum for all progressive women' as the periodical 'of women's

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> 'Correspondence: Some of the Replies to Joan Beauchamp', *Woman To-Day* (December 1937), p. 16.

struggle for peace and social advance', which was simply giving the same 'useful items of information' which other papers provided. This would mean that women would not need to buy two papers when they wanted 'to try a new dish for supper; get help in the care of their children; or... make themselves a new frock'.<sup>78</sup> This demonstrates the scope of the goals of the CMF for *Woman To-day*, intending for it to be the only newspaper that women would need to buy.

*Femmes dans l'action mondiale* published a regular page which discussed health, beauty and rights, titled '*Être Belle! Savoir, Connaître!*' from March 1937.<sup>79</sup> The content of these pages varied, with much of the advice actually centring around motherhood and the care of children. For example, the 'our health' and 'our rights' sections of the first '*Être Belle!*' page in March 1937 concerned urinary incontinence in children and juvenile criminal responsibility, with only the 'our beauty' section providing direct advice for women. In the examples available, only two have an 'our beauty' section, while the third example contained advice on 'our children', 'our health' (specifically breastfeeding), 'our cooking', 'our home' (how to create space for a baby in small homes), and a book review section. The editors of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* generally conflated the concept of 'beauty' with well cared for skin, with less focus on the application of cosmetics than *Woman To-day*.

The periodicals also published advice on how to combat and treat diseases and improve health, which dealt with measles, chicken pox and the flu amongst others. These columns advocated that adults 'preventatively vaccinate' children following the infection of a family member.<sup>80</sup> The columns also advised sunbathing as a means of 'stimulating circulation and cell activity' to tone the body and 'increase resistance to infections'. The doctor writing this column instructed that

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>79</sup> It was gone by March 1939; Gallica has only one digitised edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* published in 1938, so we cannot pinpoint when '*Être Belle!*' was no longer a regular part of the journal.

<sup>80</sup> 'Conseils du docteur', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April 1935), p. 14.

'a very strong pigmentation [of the skin] forms a sort of screen against radiation, and those who seek only the therapeutic action of the sun will have to temporarily cease the cure and resume it when the pigmentation has alleviated. But do not believe that pigmentation is a danger.'<sup>81</sup>

CMF periodicals also published articles on physical fitness and health for women. Moving away from the Victorian constraints which dictated how far women engaged in physical culture, the interwar period saw a growing interest in fitness amongst women which the CMF endorsed on numerous occasions. Women participated in physical culture for a variety of reasons, including because it provided 'an appealing place to be modern, to have fun in the company of other women... to enjoy what it was to be modern, but not daring' and through a desire to be 'slim'.<sup>82</sup> However, while some fitness authors of the period presented physical culture as emancipatory, others, like the Australian swimmer Annette Kellermann, preached fitness as 'essential for women to find and keep love'.<sup>83</sup>

According to Patricia Vertinsky, this new phenomenon of women's interest in fitness can be traced to the growing numbers of young women entering the workforce; women 'increasingly felt that they had earned the right to some leisure and that they could spend more time, energy and money in order to improve their health and appearance'. The post-war economic and societal conditions created an environment in which women were able 'to engage with practices of self', including exercise.<sup>84</sup> Exercise classes were not only designed to cultivate physical culture among women, but to create a place for working women to 'renew energy' while stimulating 'the thrill of worthwhile achievement through healthful activities'.<sup>85</sup> Exercise allowed women to engage in a 'deliberate and active display of themselves as people' which created a 'sense of self' and provided opportunities for socialisation.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> 'Conseils du docteur', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (May 1935), p. 13.

<sup>82</sup> Macdonald, 'Body and Self: Learning to be Modern in 1920s-1930s Britain', p. 273.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 243.

<sup>84</sup> Patricia Vertinsky, 'Building the Body Beautiful' in the Women's League for Health and Beauty: yoga and female agency in 1930s Britain', *Rethinking History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2012), p. 527.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 526.

<sup>86</sup> Macdonald, 'Body and Self: Learning to be Modern in 1920s-1930s Britain', p. 275.

Both *Woman To-day* and *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* regularly published articles on how women could improve their health through the practice of gymnastics, swimming, and cycling. Florence Birchenough, the Vice-President of the British Women's Amateur Athletic Association, penned an article which detailed the positive results that had come with the entrance of women into 'the most strenuous sports'; Birchenough argued that women who participated in sports had a 'healthier and stronger body' which was less likely to have 'fainting fits and migraines'. In addition, as a 'natural consequence' of this healthy lifestyle, women found that they tended to have a 'freer mental and moral outlook' which was cultivated by 'a sense of fair play and practice in being a good loser'. Birchenough emphasised that participation alone would help to 'keep one young, active and in good health and give that added interest to what might be a work-a-day or hum-drum life'.<sup>87</sup>

*Woman To-day* was a proponent of exercise for health reasons above all; in an article written by a medical professional entitled 'Spring Fitness', advice was provided on how to build 'resistance' after the 'strain of a long winter' through the practice of exercise. The article suggested that the reader could increase their fitness by 'walking part of the way to the office or by walking to the shops instead of taking that bus or train!' Similarly, the author also suggested that, 'on account of the increased susceptibility to infection' which occurred in spring, women should 'avoid overcrowded or stuffy places', instead going for 'a walk in the park instead of that visit to the cinema'.<sup>88</sup> Cycling was also a suitable sport for women to engage in; Billie Dovey, 'Britain's Cycling "Keep-Fit" Girl' who rode nearly 30,000 miles in 1938, wrote an article for *Woman To-day* which argued that anyone who took up cycling would 'eat, sleep, and feel better for it all', in addition to experiencing 'the beauties of unspoilt scenery' and 'travelling silently under your own power'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Florence Birchenough, 'Beauty and Athletics', *Woman To-Day* (June 1937), p.13.

<sup>88</sup> 'Spring Fitness: Are you tired, rundown, nervy?', *Woman To-Day* (March 1939), p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Billie Dovey, 'Cycle for your health', *Woman To-Day* (April 1939), p. 4.



Fashion page '*La Mode*' appeared in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* throughout 1935, often as the final page in the periodical; on some occasions, the page published fashion advice alongside knitting patterns and information about how to make the clothes mentioned on the page. For example, the March 1935 edition contained diagrams on how to make a 'sports bodice' and skirt, which gave 'a thin silhouette without being clingy'.<sup>90</sup> The content differed seasonally and in functionality: 'light dresses for sunny days', bathing costumes, sportswear and 'blouses and jackets' were all featured in *La Mode* fashion pages. The images that accompanied these articles were drawings of thin, glamorously made up women with well-coiffed hair, the antithesis of the image of the busy working mother with little free time which actually represented the readership of the periodical. Much fashion coverage either assumed an abundance of free time to sew the patterns or disposable income to purchase the clothes featured in the periodical. The clothing was often impractical for women working manual jobs or those who remained in the home as housewives, like capes and blouses with large sleeves and bows. The recommended materials were also generally expensive and not suitable for potentially messy work, including 'Chinese crepe' and 'silk', which excluded women who had little extra income from purchasing them.

The representation of fashion in largely bourgeois terms in a periodical geared towards working class women was not only an issue in CMF journals. Karen Hunt has examined fashion pages in *Labour Woman*, the British Labour Party's periodical for women, which featured a similar fashion page as the CMF journals in which a new knitting pattern was published each month. However, many were 'technically demanding' and 'all were represented by a line drawing of a glamorous, slim young woman with shingled hair' which sat 'rather uneasily with the continuing representation of the working-class housewife in the text'. These images clashed with

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<sup>90</sup> 'La Mode', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1935), p. 15.

the image of the typical reader of *Labour Woman*, who tended to be 'older, less healthy or relaxed, and seemed to be so time-poor that it was hard to see when she could wear all these clothes, let alone find the time to make them'.<sup>91</sup> This suggests the bourgeois influence on fashion pages in working-class women's periodicals was not unique to those published by the CMF. However, Adrian Bingham has argued that editors in the interwar period saw fashion as something that 'appealed across the age spectrum and the gradations of social class and status', which 'injected glamour and fantasy into pages often otherwise dominated by mundane realities of domestic life'.<sup>92</sup> The CMF could have been using fashion to provide working-class women with a sense of escapism in their otherwise largely political periodical, as it was only the only example of the CMF presenting advice to its readership which excluded working-class women to any extent.

Cosmetics and skincare were a means for women to enhance their features for themselves, lending credence to the idea that the CMF published such articles to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of such practices. The coverage of beauty in CMF periodicals reinforced the idea that cosmetics were for every woman regardless of class or political orientation or lack thereof. The periodicals also largely catered their beauty and health advice to women on small incomes and with limited time available to them, in that much of it could be practised in the home with household objects and within a short timeframe. However, the fashion coverage in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* generally did not cater for its working-class readers and the clothes it publicised were overwhelmingly traditionally feminine, like 'light dresses for beautiful days' or polka dot blouses, and thus were by and large not suitable for housewives or women employed in manual work due to cost or practicality. The coverage of

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<sup>91</sup> Karen Hunt, 'Labour Woman and the Housewife', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918 – 1939*, p. 248.

<sup>92</sup> Adrian Bingham, 'Modern Housecraft? Women's Pages in the National Daily Press', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918 – 1939*, p. 227.

fashion trends was perhaps the most exclusionary aspect of advice in CMF journals for women as individuals; however, it can also be argued that these sections represented a form of escapism for working women who were interested in fashion but who may have been unable to devote much time or money to it.

### **Advice for Women as Mothers**

Stephen Brooke has argued that, after the First World War, 'motherhood became a valid social category of femininity, a borderland between public and private spheres' which some feminist maternalists used to 'cast women as citizens equal to men'. However, in Brooke's analysis, the emphasis on women's contribution to society through their potential role as mothers perpetuated the divisions between economic work and work in the home, fixing the concept of motherhood 'as subordinate or dependent'.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, Lisa Brush has suggested that maternalist language can be identified as playing a crucial role in securing women's rights:

'Mothers must have access to conditions that will allow them to flourish as persons: bodily integrity, moral autonomy, material security, relational integrity, and political efficacy. On the basis of maternalist claims, women have sometimes won material and ideological benefits of entitlement, participation, and self-possession'.<sup>94</sup>

The CMF were active proponents of maternalist language, and the concept of motherhood was common in their campaigns and their periodicals. Motherhood could be potentially empowering, but it was also unfortunately presented as the norm, and the idea that women may choose to remain childless was not explored. Childcare advice columns, knitting patterns and cookery pages demonstrated the expectation that women would focus on the needs of their husbands and children above their own. The childcare advice in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* was even positioned next to

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<sup>93</sup> Stephen Brooke, "'A New World for Women'? Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (2001), p. 434.

<sup>94</sup> Lisa H. Brush, 'Love, Toil, and Trouble: Motherhood and Feminist Politics', *Signs*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1996), p. 430.

knitting patterns and cooking tips. For example, a column on childhood rickets was positioned alongside a pattern for a 'sweater-jacket' and recipes for 'veal or beef heart steak' and 'butter carrots'.<sup>95</sup> For the most part, these columns dealt with childhood health, including flu, rickets, fainting and adenoid troubles which applied to children of all ages, but tended not to publish advice on babies.

On the other hand, the childcare articles published in *Woman To-day* almost entirely focused on information pertinent to infants. For example, the periodical offered step-by-step advice on how to wean babies off liquids and onto solid foods, a 'really revolutionary time' which many mothers were concerned about.<sup>96</sup> These articles were written by an unnamed 'Woman Doctor' who advised readers on the milestones of infancy; in terms of teething, the 'woman doctor' suggested that mothers prepare for it during pregnancy by eating the right 'mineral compounds' (largely milk and vegetables) and by absorbing 'as much sunlight as she can by getting out of doors and allowing the sun to shine on her skin'. Similarly, after birth, the doctor emphasised the necessity of feeding the baby milk and allowing it 'all the sunshine that is possible', even advocating that during wet weather a mother should 'try and get artificial sunlight treatment' for the baby.<sup>97</sup> The knitting patterns featured in *Woman To-day* were also often intended for babies, such as 'a cosy little outfit for Baby's first outing'.<sup>98</sup>

In 1937, *Woman To-day* announced its intention to publish a monthly advice column for mothers entitled 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow'. The page was announced in the September 1937 edition which described the future content of the page: the first article was to be about pre-natal care, while the second would tackle the topic of 'artificial feeding' for use when breast-feeding was not possible.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> 'Notre chez nous ! Nos Enfants !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (November 1935), p. 15.

<sup>96</sup> 'Baby wants to bite', *Woman To-Day* (September 1936), p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> 'Those teething troubles', *Woman To-Day* (November 1936), p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> 'For the littlest one of all', *Woman To-Day* (December 1936), p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow', *Woman To-Day* (September 1937), p. 14.

However, this advice page was soon discarded, with only one published which dealt with ante-natal care for mothers, including tips on diet, dress, 'Baths and Care of the Nipples', and bowel movements to keep women healthy post-childbirth.<sup>100</sup> It also briefly provided a place in the periodical for women to directly ask a nurse advice on the health of their baby. Other articles in *Woman To-day* discussed welfare clinics that mothers could take their babies to for a health check, whether babies should be allowed to suck their thumbs ('only the straight-laced and the would-be scientific parents oppose it'), violence as a punishment for bad behaviour, and how to work a respirator for a baby during wartime (an article which was written by *Woman To-day* editor Charlotte Haldane's husband).<sup>101</sup>

The CMF also used its periodicals to inform women on the political and social issues which affected them as mothers; *Woman To-day*, in response to a growing debate about abortion in the latter part of the 1930s, published a number of articles on the topic. Growing anxieties about the rate of maternal mortality (which remained at around '5 deaths in every thousand births' at the same time as the infant mortality rate had declined) led to the publication of reports in the British press on abortion which alternated between blaming women's emancipation and changes to sexual morality for the number of women who died in childbirth. The 'increased nervous tension' of women, exemplified by their 'fashion of slimming' in conjunction with 'an extended use of contraceptive measures and a reputed increase in the practice of abortion' were blamed for the high maternal mortality rate.<sup>102</sup> In addition, the practice of abortion was 'common' amongst working women in the interwar period and was to

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<sup>100</sup> 'Children To-day – Citizens To-morrow', *Woman To-Day* (October 1937), p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> Enid Slater, 'Cynics and Clinics', *Woman To-Day* (April 1937), p. 14; Violet Hoare, 'Should they or shouldn't they?', *Woman To-Day* (June 1937), p. 12; Joan, 'Are you on the child's side?', *Woman To-Day* (October 1937), p. 13; J.B.S. Haldane, 'You will have to learn how to work baby's respirator...', *Woman To-Day* (March 1939), p. 8.

<sup>102</sup> Brooke, "'A New World for Women'? Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s", p. 435 – 436.

'some degree' accepted in working-class communities as 'access to abortion was relatively easy', although the experience was presumably not.<sup>103</sup>

Writing in July 1939 in *Woman To-day*, 'a leading woman doctor' discussed the considerations of an Interdepartmental Government Committee on abortion laws which had been set up 'to enquire into the prevalence of abortion and... to consider what steps could be taken to secure the reduction of maternal mortality and morbidity arising from this cause'. The report of the Committee was published in the wake of the court case of a women's specialist, Doctor Aleck Bourne, who had performed an abortion on a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by five off-duty British soldiers. The author of the article in *Woman To-day* was critical of the Committee's findings, as the only thing she agreed with was the Committee's recommendation that 'a medical practitioner should be allowed to induce abortion not only if the operation is carried out to save the life of a woman but in order to prevent her health from being seriously impaired'. However, even this came with the caveat that the abortion records should be available to the police. The legalisation of abortion in cases of rape, incest or hereditary disease were also not recommended by the Committee. In addition, it rejected the idea that information on birth control should be available through local health centres. However, the author pointed out that two of the members of the Committee, Doctor Watts-Eden and Lady Balfour, had emphasised the 'injustice of withholding knowledge on birth control from the poor, while the well-to-do are able to get all the advice they want on the subject, by paying for it'.<sup>104</sup>

Dr Watts Eden and Lady Balfour suggested that 'if the practice of birth control for economic reasons is not in the national interest, this fact should be impressed on all classes, independently of social status'.<sup>105</sup> This was the view of many abortion law reform campaigners in this period; for example, Dr Helen Wright, a doctor at the North

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 432 and 434.

<sup>104</sup> 'Should women have the right... to choose motherhood or...?', *Woman To-Day* (July 1939), p. 17.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

Kensington Birth Control Clinic, wrote to the Committee expressing the view that 'the most frequent cause of abortions is an economic one' and that the best way to prevent abortions was to educate working class women on their birth control options.<sup>106</sup> The CMF, as could be expected from a feminist leaning organisation in this period, vehemently supported women's right to choose when they had children and consistently linked the issues of abortion and birth control with economic concerns; Anne Fremantle, in an article entitled 'To be or not to be?' emphasised that 'an unlimited family may be for various reasons - housing, money, health – a misery and a danger to the mother', and stressed that 'a planned family, born over a period of years so as to suit the pockets and general well-being of the whole home, is an asset to the nation'.<sup>107</sup> In a similar way to coverage on abortion debates in Labour Party publications in the period, the CMF presented birth control and abortion as an issue of class inequality, 'rather than the emancipation of women and their sexuality'.<sup>108</sup> Middle-class women were more able to access therapeutic abortions in cases of medical necessity than working-class women, who 'relied upon abortifacient pills... the insertion of implements such as crochet hooks and knitting needles, or folk remedies such as slippery elm bark'. The results of these methods varied from being ineffectual to being fatal, as unsafe abortions 'amounted to about 14% of all puerperal deaths'.<sup>109</sup>

The affordability of milk in interwar Britain was also a concern of *Woman To-day*, which argued that a reduction in milk prices was needed to combat the negative nutritional effect of the lack of milk on mothers and their children. Medical professionals gave their opinions about nutritional deficit in the periodicals; one article

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<sup>106</sup> 'Letter from Dr Helen Wright to the Interdepartmental Government Committee on Abortion', MH 71/25, The National Archives (TNA).

<sup>107</sup> Hon. Anne Fremantle, 'To be or not to be?', *Woman To-Day* (August 1939), p. 9.

<sup>108</sup> June Hannam, 'Debating Feminism in the Socialist Press: Women and the *New Leader*', in Clay et al. (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918 – 1939*, p. 381.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 94.

consisted of an interview with Dr Elizabeth Jacobs, a women's health specialist who was also Vice-Chairman of the Women's Committee for Peace and Democracy (the organisation that the CMF would morph into in 1939) and a Borough Councillor. Jacobs spoke of her experience of treating undernourished women who could not afford to buy milk at '2/4 a gallon', and as a result became a 'weakened, overworked, expectant mother'. Jacobs stated that she could refer mothers in need to a Borough Councils scheme to provide free milk, but that this did not entirely solve the problem. First, she was opposed to the fact that a mother's health had to be 'undermined to the point of serious illness before she is eligible for a grant', and second many mothers, upon receiving the free milk, gave it instead to their children. Jacobs lamented, 'So *her* milk is going to the children and her own health and the chances of her future baby have gone on deteriorating. Already I suspect T.B. Yet when I tried to scold her, I found I couldn't. Could you?' Jacobs argued in favour of extending and improving the current milk distribution scheme by abolishing Means Tests in boroughs which required them before milk could be provided. For Jacobs, this was an urgent situation that threatened women's lives and required more publicity: 'if public-spirited women in every Borough would talk about this scheme and agitate for its improvement, the tragic cavalcade of mothers' and infants' coffins which pass yearly out of our London maternity hospitals might be halved.'<sup>110</sup>

*Femmes dans l'action mondiale* also often provided advice on breastfeeding. Rima Apple has described women's magazines as the 'most important' source of information for women in the interwar period on child-care and particularly on infant feeding practices, including breastfeeding.<sup>111</sup> Regular breastfeeding of babies was emphasised as a necessity often in the periodical. They claimed that 'the statistics speak plainly and show that mortality among breastfed children is five times lower

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<sup>110</sup> Dr Elizabeth Jacobs, 'Babies before buttons!', *Woman To-Day* (April 1939), p. 18.

<sup>111</sup> Rima D. Apple, *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890 – 1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 150.



than for bottle-fed children', and thus women, particularly young mothers, should participate in the practice for the good of their child. However, the article acknowledged that 'a large number of young mothers do not have sufficient milk' which they argued was 'a result of modern life'. The article provided a number of solutions to this problem: feeding babies correctly at regular intervals and using 'small appliances [sold] in pharmacies' to pump milk if the baby could not feed itself were just two of the solutions given. In terms of the mother's health, *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* argued that during breastfeeding, the mother 'sometimes feels pain' which was normal unless it was accompanied by a 'local hardening of the breasts' at which point a doctor must be contacted. In addition, the periodical warned against changing the lifestyle of a breastfeeding woman too much; it advocated a good diet and sleep and advised that women could continue their household work, 'but without going to exhaustion'.<sup>112</sup>

Another example of the portrayal of breastfeeding in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* was the images which accompanied a short story published in the periodical. Written by French author Henriette Sauret and titled '*Nativité au 6<sup>e</sup> étage*', the piece tells the story of two medical professionals visiting two women in the same apartment building. The first, Doctor Morienne, visited a woman who, after an accident, had lost the ability to have children without severely endangering both her and the baby's lives. The woman is told by Morienne that she has a one in a hundred chance of delivering a baby safely, while the other ninety-nine percent would put her life in danger and certainly 'destroy [the life of] the child'. The second medical professional, a midwife named Giffre, had been attending a young woman of nineteen named Annette who had just given birth to a baby she did not want. However, the content of the story did not focus on breastfeeding; the only mention of breastfeeding was when Giffre tries to convince the young woman to feed her baby for only ten

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<sup>112</sup> 'Être Belle ! Savoir, Connaître !', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (April – May 1938), p. 15.

minutes. However, the story was accompanied by three images, one of which explicitly shows a woman breastfeeding her baby. The woman is exposing one of her breasts, which may have been considered shocking by many members of society at the time. However, the fact that it was published in a periodical explicitly aimed towards women would mean that most readers who viewed the image were not likely to find it as offensive as if it were published in a popular newspaper, for example. The fact that the image has nothing to do with the story it accompanied further reinforced its striking nature; the only acknowledgement of the picture was a caption that read 'Is there anything more beautiful than this child on the breast of his mother?', which positioned breastfeeding as a positive, natural process which was to be revered.<sup>113</sup>



Figure 3

## Conclusion

CMF periodicals held many resemblances with women's periodicals published in the Soviet Union in the same period. Alison Rowley's work on Soviet regional periodicals for women has demonstrated that, in the interwar period, Soviet women were still

<sup>113</sup> Henriette Sauret, 'Nativité au 6<sup>e</sup> étage', *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* (March 1937), p. 10.

expected 'to have children, to be responsible for the housekeeping and cooking and to work outside the home' despite the emancipatory promises made at the time of the Revolution. One way that this was reinforced was through the regular publication of 'advice for housewives' in local Soviet periodicals, with subjects varying from 'the preservation of meat products to instructions for sewing projects'.<sup>114</sup> Work was presented as a 'liberating force' as it was in CMF periodicals, but the dual burden was still similarly perpetuated. One cartoon in *Rabotnitsa i domashniaia khoziaika* depicted a 'multi-tasking' woman described as a 'female activist' who held a paper in one hand and 'with the other grasps a baby who is sampling food from a pot on the stove'.<sup>115</sup> It is unlikely that the CMF leadership was being instructed on how to structure the content of their periodicals by the Soviet Union as reports by the Executive Committee of the CMF suggest that there was some level of choice for national sections in what they included. However, it is possible that the leaders of the CMF, who were closely linked to the USSR, were familiar with how Soviet women's periodicals presented women as workers, mothers and consumers, and followed their lead.

Leila Rupp has argued that periodicals published by international women's organisations 'served as a strong but invisible cord tying women together across national borders', a point which can certainly be applied to the CMF; the organisation had goals for their journals which transcended national boundaries, as every journal informed women on political events, their rights, their domestic concerns and rallied them to protest injustice.<sup>116</sup> One major theme ran through all of these aspects of their publications, as the CMF largely imagined their members as mothers or potential mothers to create bonds of community and sisterhood. This was intended to galvanise

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<sup>114</sup> Alison Rowley, 'Spreading the Bolshevik Message? Soviet Regional Periodicals for Women, 1917 – 1941', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 47, Nos. 1 – 2 (2005), p. 116.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>116</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 178.

women to action, as the special edition of *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* on the *grévistes* demonstrated; women were expected to fight for the vote, their right to work, and against low pay and bad working conditions not for themselves but for their children and potential future children. Work outside the home was often presented as a secondary concern to motherhood, which in turn was presented as a 'joy' that should be women's main goal in life. However, work was still presented as a necessity for achieving economic independence. The CMF's approach to issues facing women in a national context was often contradictory; their progressive calls for universal suffrage in France and their encouragement to women to enter the workforce and to participate in strikes in large numbers contrasted with their consistent lauding of mothers and housewives as the pinnacle of womanhood.

The articles published in CMF journals which were concerned with non-political issues for women consistently emphasised the virtues of feminine ideals in health and beauty and provided their readers with advice on how to improve themselves aesthetically. Motherhood was also a key theme in this aspect of CMF journalism; health articles were often targeted towards women as mothers, and advice for the caring of children and babies reinforced the commitment of the journals to the image of women as mothers. Again, this provided a stark contrast between the progressive political concepts put forth by the committee in its journals, as motherhood as a choice and the idea of a modern woman were never really combined in one person; women who worked outside the home were always presented as only doing it to make ends meet for their family, rather than because they saw its emancipatory potential or because they enjoyed the process. Women were presented as selfless carers who only worked, participated in strikes and wanted the vote for their children, while beauty, health and fashion pages were published to give women a sense of individuality through cosmetics culture, although this was not without

controversy, as the debate stimulated by the Joan Beauchamp article in *Woman Today* demonstrated.

## Conclusion

The Nazi-Soviet pact, concluded in August 1939, greatly impacted the already fragile international political situation of the late 1930s. Convinced that 'the Soviet Union was encircled by hostile states', Stalin entered into the pact to ensure the country's security as far as possible. Zara Steiner has argued that the Soviet Union acted on 'purely pragmatic and *realpolitik* grounds' when forging the pact because Stalin knew that Germany would attack Poland regardless, and the 'German terms offered the USSR a greater measure of security than the western offers'.<sup>1</sup> The pact was presented by European communist parties as a 'gain for peace', with *L'Humanité* publishing a photo of Stalin on its front page underneath which he was labelled as 'the champion of peace and the independence of peoples'.<sup>2</sup> The PCF initially continued its anti-fascist stance, until a communiqué from the Comintern on 20 September 1939 informed the party that the war should not be considered as an anti-fascist endeavour, but rather an imperialist war that communists should oppose. French communists largely viewed the pact as a '*coup de tonnerre* (thunderclap)', yet many nevertheless continued to put their 'unconditional faith in Stalin' in the hopes that the pact would guarantee peace.<sup>3</sup>

After the outbreak of war, transnational communist collaboration became more difficult and the Soviet government restricted the information available to its citizens about the events of the war. However, after the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941 which began the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Soviets mobilised their forces and joined the war on the Allies side. Some communist party newspapers had ceased publication shortly after the pact was published, including *L'Humanité*, which would only be published inconsistently and clandestinely under the

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939*, pp. 910 and 913.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Kimyongür, 'Louis Aragon: (Re)writing the Nazi-Soviet Pact', *E-Rea* [online], Vol 4, No. 2 (2006); 'Les pourparlers de Moscou entre l'URSS et l'Allemagne servent la cause de la paix en Europe', *L'Humanité* (23 August 1939), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Kimyongür, 'Louis Aragon: (Re)writing the Nazi-Soviet Pact'.

Vichy regime. Even the *Daily Worker* in Britain was suppressed for 'its pacifist line' stemming from its inability to openly oppose German aggression due to Nazi-Soviet pact. The *Daily Worker* was banned in contravention of Defence Regulation 2D, which made it an offence to 'systematically... publish matter calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution of war'.<sup>4</sup>

David Wingeate Pike has examined how French communists conducted themselves from the invasion of France and the establishment of the Vichy regime to the German invasion of Russia. Wingeate Pike has argued that French communist resistance until June 1941 'was carried out not in accordance with Party orders but by militants acting on their own initiative', as those who aligned themselves with the Allies by undertaking clandestine resistance did so 'precisely because their moral sense of the anti-fascist struggle told them that these were their natural allies'. They acted 'in open violation of the Party's orders' which positioned the war as between imperialist antagonists and only allowed for communist resistance after the Soviet Union was invaded.<sup>5</sup> The entry of the USSR onto the anti-fascist side in 1941 finally gave national communist parties the impetus to criticise Hitler. It appears that the USSR's collaboration with the Nazis did not drastically impact the relationship between the USSR and other national communist parties. However, those whose anti-fascist convictions overrode their communist ones often had acrimonious splits from their national communist parties and were the subject of slander, as in the case of Bernadette Cattaneo.

In the early part of the Second World War, the CMF was unable to conduct openly anti-fascist campaigns because of ramifications created by the Nazi-Soviet pact and difficulties establishing links across borders, and as such generated

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> David Wingeate Pike, 'Between the Junes: The French Communists from the Collapse of France to the Invasion of Russia', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1993), p. 479 – 480.

considerably less material. This material on 'the movement of women against the imperialist war' was printed primarily in German and Russian until the end of 1941, when the committee ceased its work entirely.

This thesis has offered the first in-depth study of *the Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* and the nuances which made it such a unique organisation in the history of international activism in the inter-war period. It has charted the trajectory of the group from its inception in 1934 until its quiet dissolution in 1941 with reference to the complex and often contradictory strands of internationalist thought which characterised the committee's work. The CMF was created as a response to the greatest ideological threat facing Europe in the 1930s and in the image of already established 'mixed-gender' organisations like the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, which ignored how women were impacted by the violence of fascism and war in favour of larger political questions. The CMF, although often perceived as the women's arm of the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, operated separately from it, with very little collaboration between the two. The CMF was designed to tackle the women's issues neglected by Amsterdam-Pleyel by raising consciousness among women about the threat of fascism and by investigating the problems that threatened the way of life of women under the new ideology.

This study has emphasised the diversity of the group's membership and its ideology, particularly how it both positively and negatively impacted the committee's work. The mass character of the movement, which engaged women from all parties on the left, allowed for the complex interweaving of different tenets of feminism, pacifism, and socialism, which were utilised to encourage women to lay aside their preconceived notions of political ideologies and struggle together against fascism. This type of popular unity, which had not yet been officially adopted as a policy by the Comintern, also came with conflict and, importantly, it represented a new type of collaboration which transcended party lines, which would come to be most



prominently embodied by the Popular Front governments elected in France and Spain in 1936. Helen Graham and Paul Preston's assertion that 'popular unity was more easily achieved as a slogan than put into concrete practice' is certainly applicable to the CMF as a whole: communist women dominated the everyday organisation of the group, and while some socialist women accepted that the fight against fascism was more important than leftist political divisions, others remained concerned by the level of Soviet input in committee decisions.<sup>6</sup> None of the ideologies utilised in the work of the CMF defined the group completely: the group's feminism was expressed best in its focus on the experiences of women in conflict, with occasional focus in *Femmes dans l'action mondiale* on the fight for the vote. However feminist demands were not central to their goals and the group's pacifism was by no means absolute. In addition, its socialism was heavily influenced by communist doctrine, despite attempts to appear open to all, regardless of party.

The historiography of activism in this period has missed the CMF altogether for a number of reasons. The committee was perhaps too small and communist-oriented to be included in the historiography of interwar women's organisations, while its female character did not fit the historiography of largely male communist and anti-fascist organisations. This thesis has contributed to the research done on these themes, but it has also explored how women created political space for themselves through their activism by weaving different ideologies together. This also created an elaborate network of women who were involved in different causes which often overlapped and even transferred through their role in the CMF: the prime example of this would be the socialist Jeanne Beaufeise, who visited the Soviet Union as part of a CMF delegation and returned committed to communist principles.

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Graham and Paul Preston, 'The Popular Front and the Struggle against Fascism' in Helen Graham and Paul Preston (eds.), *The Popular Front in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 5.

Until recently, an examination of the CMF would have been difficult but not impossible; however, with the digitisation of the CMF papers, this thesis has benefitted from access to a wealth of information which has previously not been utilised and has allowed for an investigation into one of the most enigmatic women's organisations created as a reaction to the tumult of the early 1930s. The reasons that the CMF was important in this context are threefold and have formed the overarching themes of analysis in this thesis. First, the CMF was intended to be a mass organisation of women with no overt emphasis on the party affiliations of its members, the only political stipulation being that the women involved must be determined to actively struggle against fascism. How far this was the case can be determined by the diversity of women who were involved in the international CMF congresses in 1934 and 1938. For example, at the founding congress in 1934, socialists had under a quarter of the number of delegates that the communists had. However, what non-communist participation in CMF congresses represented was just as important as the reality; socialist women were involved in various national CMF committees, often against the wishes of their respective socialist parties and the LSI, which gave the appearance of a unified mass movement and legitimised the CMF's claims to speak on behalf of women across Europe and the wider world.

The CMF did actively attempt to attract non-communist and non-political women into its fold, but the blatant communist influence on the group may have hindered how far they were successful. It is impossible to make a judgement in this regard without access to membership statistics from each national section. It is clear that the CMF found the most success in France, a country which had a radical tradition and from which the international leadership originated. However, the character of the movement was still wide-reaching, from its diverse congresses to the numerous national journals published across the globe in which the CMF were involved. The group also often influenced people beyond their membership, reaching non-members

through their journals and through their presence at various demonstrations, meetings, and conferences.

The second major theme of this thesis is how far Soviet and Comintern input influenced the committee. As a starting point, this study takes communist input in the committee as fact: the CMF was designated by the Comintern as a mass auxiliary organisation in its archives. This does not necessarily imply total control of the CMF, however. In fact, it does not imply partial control either. The evidence from the CMF archives and from studies of its leadership suggest a more mutual relationship, in which the Comintern and its Soviet representatives often provided advice and direction for the committee, as well as some level of financial aid, although we cannot be sure of the extent. On the other hand, the CMF was a propaganda vehicle for the USSR, which was designed to encourage women to support the country because of its anti-fascist activities and moves towards women's emancipation, while concurrently allowing the Comintern to observe the socialist women who were involved with the committee. In addition, it created opportunities for communist conversion through CMF delegations to the USSR, which saw the best the country had to offer but avoided the negative aspects. There was also a constant dialogue between CMF and Soviet women, which often extended beyond the professional into the personal; their correspondence was never formal and friendly advice appears to have been always welcome. In addition, there was open praise for the Soviet Union in CMF congresses, manifestos, and journals which clearly demonstrated the allegiances of the committee.

The final theme that characterised the work of the CMF was how they utilised gendered language which tended to err on the traditional in their campaigns and publications to appeal to a large variety of women. They used women's roles as mothers to emotionally appeal to them by utilising, for example, images of children maimed by war, to create a bond of sisterhood between women across borders and

between women under fascist dictatorships and women in capitalist countries. Even women who were shedding the constraints of traditional femininity, like *milicianas* in Spain, were noted for their dual roles as mothers and fighters. This emphasis on maternity was not a new one; women's peace organisations including WILPF and the Women's Co-operative Guild both used maternal language in their campaigns before the CMF had been founded.<sup>7</sup> Maternal language utilised for the purposes of pacifist activism did not stop with the end of the interwar period; Women Strike for Peace's campaign to end the war in Vietnam bore striking similarities to the CMF campaigns against fascism, as they utilised maternity to 'further cement the common bond of motherhood between American and Vietnamese women'. They demonstrated that 'the fate of American women was "tied to that of Vietnamese women"' much as the CMF did with women in Spain, Germany, and China.<sup>8</sup> However, Women Strike for Peace actively suppressed the stories of Vietnamese women as fighters in order to present a sympathetic image of Vietnamese women as victims, which the CMF never did. However, this is one example of a deliberate tradition of the deployment and reinforcement of women's potential for maternity throughout the twentieth century by women's peace groups as a means of fostering connections between the women at home and the oppressed women (wherever they may be). The use of maternalist language also shows us who the CMF perceived their target audience to be: working-class mothers, who were more likely to respond to images of injured children and stories of the horrors of war on communities than the intellectuals who the CMF employed to report on these issues. It also indicates that the committee held some stereotypical views of these women, which expected them to prioritise motherhood

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the Women's Co-operative Guild and its use of maternal language, see Naomi Black, 'The Mothers' International: The Women's Co-operative Guild and Feminist Pacifism', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (1984), pp. 467–476; see also Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, 'Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (1990), pp. 1076-1108.

<sup>8</sup> Jessica M. Frazier, 'Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women's Union, and the Women's Union of Liberation, 1965–1968', *Peace and Change*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012), p. 345.

(or potential motherhood) over financial independence and work, both morally and in actuality.

The CMF was a small organisation in comparison to other women's groups of the period, but the committee was important because it was an ambitious group with lofty goals which centred on lessening the burden of fascism and war on women. It engaged some of the best and brightest women activists, regardless of party, and was the only international women's organisation which actively tried to struggle against fascism in all its forms. That it was created at all is impressive, due to the early unwillingness of any other feminist and pacifist organisations to favour any political party or system. The CMF was a complex organisation, with a web of different ideological interests which always had the potential to create difficulties (and sometimes did), but which also created new opportunities for collaboration among women of different parties.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

'Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes! Contre la guerre et le fascisme: Compte rendu des travaux du congrès', 1934

#### National Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris, 1934) p. 31

Country	Number of delegates
France	630
Great Britain	77
Saar	48
Italy (including emigration)	47
Holland	45
United States	40
Belgium	34
Switzerland	28
Poland (including emigration)	28
Romania (including emigration)	25
Czechoslovakia	19
Germany	15
Spain	12
USSR	10
Austria (including emigration)	9
Bulgaria	3
Greece	3
Hungary (including emigration)	6
Denmark	5
Sweden	5
Yugoslavia	4
Indonesia	4
Norway	2
Argentina	1
Indochina	1
Mexico	1
Cuba	1
Australia	1

## Appendix B

### Social Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris, 1934), p. 36

Not including France (474 delegates)

Occupation:	Number of Delegates
Workers	142
Housewives	158
Liberal Careers	50
Education	38
Employees	28
Students	23
Nurses	11
Rural workers	5
Cleaners	5
Shopkeepers	3
Civil Servant	2
Without designation	9

French delegation (630 delegates)

Occupation	Number of delegates:
Workers	208
Housewives	169
Employees	72
Teachers	58
Civil Servants	41
Liberal Careers	22
Nurses	16
Shopkeepers	13
Students	7
Unemployed	7
Rural workers	4
Craftsman	2
Member of a cooperative	2
Without designation	9

## Appendix C

### Political Composition of CMF Congress Delegates (Paris 1934) p. 37

Political Party/Activist Designation	Number of Delegates
Socialists	79
Christian Socialists	16
Communists	320
Members of the 'Fédération Syndicale Internationale' (Amsterdam)	54
Members of the 'Internationale Syndicale Rouge' (Profintern)	109
Pacifists	158
Feminists	64
Cooperative activists	27
Members of Cultural Organisations	47

## Appendix D

Prezeau, 'Le Mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel (1932-1934): Un champ d'essai du Front unique'

### Composition of the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War, 1932 p. 89

Political Composition of the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War (1932)		Social Composition of the Amsterdam Congress against Imperialist War (1932)	
Without party/various parties	1,041/47.40%	Workers/Employees/ Teachers/Civil servants	1,865/84.92 %
Communists	830/37.79%	Intellectuals	249/4.33%
Socialists	291/13.25%	Peasants	72 / 3.27%
Independent socialists	24/1.09%	Various	0.45%
Trotskyists	10/0.45%		



## Appendix E

### Political Composition of the Pleyel European Worker's Anti-Fascist Congress, 1933

p. 91

Without party	1,801 or 56.12%
Communists	1,153 or 35.93%
Socialists	199 or 6.20%
Anarchists	26 or 0.81%
Various	15 or 0.46%
Republican Party	11 or 0.34%
Christians	4 or 0.12%

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